

## A VERY BRADY RENOVATION

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Grace Church in New York  
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*How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God. (Psalm 84:1)*

For those of us old enough to remember 1969, it's hard to believe that the year of Apollo 11, Woodstock, the summer of love, the Stonewall riots, and the Miracle Mets was a half-century ago. Throughout 2019 we've paused to reflect on the impact of these cultural milestones. But let not this golden anniversary year pass without remembering that 1969 was also the launch of the television series, *The Brady Bunch*. The show was about a blended family that resulted when a woman with three young daughters married a man with three young sons. Yes, that's the way they all became the Brady Bunch. What followed was an earworm of a theme song, the hijinks of nine people (including a full-time, live-in maid) all in one house, and many truly cringe worthy plot resolutions.

In addition to the nine characters, the Brady house itself became a prominent fixture of the show. The exterior shots were of an actual address in Studio City, CA. The interior featured two stories with ample space for all: four bedrooms, a den for the father to do his work, a grand living area with an open staircase, and even an attic that in later seasons became a bedroom. The show ran for just five seasons, then strangely became more popular in reruns than it ever was during its original airing. In fact, last year the actual Brady house in Studio City came up for sale, and a bidding war ensued to own a piece of Americana. The winner was HGTV, the house-and-garden cable television channel. Their plan was to bring back all six Brady kids, restore the house to its groovy, 1970s glory days, and make a reality TV show out of the process. The show would be called *A Very Brady Renovation*.

Here's the catch: the roomy interior of the house that the show led us all to believe was there never was there. The interior existed only as a set on a soundstage. Behind the front door of the actual familiar house was a dramatically smaller dwelling: split level, not two stories; two bedrooms, not four. In truth, the very Brady renovation would be a gut renovation, plus a massive addition. But America can now breathe a sigh of relief. The Brady house is finally at unity with itself. The inside and outside are justified. As for the Brady kids, I was surprised to see that over the past 50 years they've all aged. Imagine that. Meanwhile, it seems to me that I have remained remarkably the same. Indeed, I'm confident that I grow more and more hair atop my head every day!

Keep the Brady Bunch house in mind, as we turn now to today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. Luke records a parable of Jesus that poses an ironic challenge for Pledge Sunday. We've heard how two men went up to the Temple to pray. One is a tax collector. In the time and place of Jesus, tax collectors were seen as the lowest of the low. They worked for the Romans who occupied the land. The Jews hated paying taxes to the foreign infidel, and thus they considered those who collected them to be especially vile: collaborators with the enemy, traitors. Most tax collectors fully deserved their reputation. What you saw on the outside was what you got on the inside. They were corrupt in their dealings, and lined their pockets by cheating their own people. Tax collectors normally never would go to the Temple to pray. But some crisis of the soul has brought this one into the house of God, where he stands off by himself, not even looking up, beating his breast, and declaring, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"

The other man praying in the Temple is a Pharisee. In the days of Jesus, most people regarded the Pharisees as good, respectable citizens, deeply committed to living and teaching the Law of Moses. As such they represented the epitome of Judaism. They fought the good fight with all their might. The Pharisee in today's parable goes to the Temple and prays his well-known prayer. He thanks God that he isn't like other people – especially not a wretch like the tax collector over there. He keeps the law to the letter and fasts twice a week. Then hear this: he tithes. He gives ten-percent of his income, right off the top, to the Temple. Let me tell you: any priest overhearing the Pharisee's prayer would have been happy to receive a pledge card from this one. Indeed, his promising exterior self suggests an even more splendid, spacious mansion within prepared for the Lord.

Those of you who have read the Bible and listened to a sermon or two might hear the parable as you would watch a rerun of an old, familiar TV show. You know what's coming. But Jesus intended the ending of the parable to startle, even scandalize his original hearers. It's the tax collector who goes home to his house justified, not the Pharisee. So here we are on Pledge Sunday with a dilemma on our hands. Try as I might, I can't get this tax collector, the one who goes home justified, to fill out a pledge card. How much easier things would be if Jesus instead had pointed to the morally upright, ten-percent giving Pharisee as the one whose example we should follow. But he didn't. Why not? Well, it brings me back to the Brady house. What you see on the outside is not what you get on the inside. The generous, largeness of soul you expect in the Pharisee simply isn't there. Instead, the rooms are constricted and the hallways tight. It would take *A Very Brady Renovation*, indeed, to justify the interior with the exterior of the Pharisee, and make him right with God.

Consider, for all of his exterior deeds, the Pharisee *trusted in himself that he was righteous*. He trusted that his personal merit had already built in himself a mansion where the Lord of hosts would be pleased to dwell. In the Pharisee's figuring, righteousness was his due because he had kept the law, given his money, and gone for a day or two without food. Let's face it, God the Omnipotent surely bows to such noble sacrifices. God owed him. God was in his debt. But you see, the Pharisee had it all wrong. Good deeds and moral effort are an insufficient foundation to support a true faith in the living God. He trusted in himself rather than in God's mercy.

The Pharisee also *regarded others with contempt*. With a sideways glance he compared himself to the tax collector, and he took delight in how far he had outpaced the thieves, rogues, and adulterers behind him. The Pharisee is like the football player who breaks free from the defense and trusts in himself that he will surely score a touchdown. Therefore, what he does is turn around a few yards before he crosses the goal line, and taunts his opponents by beginning his little celebration dance early. It's called showboating. Let me tell you, on YouTube you can find dozens of videos under the search line, "never celebrate too early." Invariably the gloating player will have the ball stripped from his hands or get leveled by an opponent he didn't see coming. The Pharisee should beware of showboating in the temple. The purpose of his faith wasn't to be in competition with the tax collector. Frankly, he might have rejoiced that the tax collector was in the temple at all, and that his tithe played a small part in providing a place where a sinner could begin anew.

So let's talk about the Pharisee's tithe. Let's talk about the Pharisee's giving and ours. To be sure, my assignment today is to persuade you to fill out a pledge envelope with a promise of financial giving in the year 2020. But in all truth I want to be sure that what we do is built on a sure foundation, not a flawed foundation. At the last Habitat house we restored – Unity House – we learned at the outset that the foundation was buckling. It would have been foolish to build or restore anything on top of it until it was fixed. Likewise, the Pharisee was building on the flawed foundation of trusting in his own righteousness. What is the sure foundation? It is gratitude. Yes, the Pharisee prayed a prayer of thanksgiving. But he wasn't grateful to God. He was just full of

himself. Instead of thanking God that he was not like other people, he might have thanked God for all the blessings of his life, and the advantages he'd had to make him who he was. I mean, how did one even become a Pharisee back in those days? I don't pretend to know, but my guess is it didn't happen without being born into the right sort of family, and even then calling on some inside connections. Genuine gratitude without the showboating would be the better foundation upon which the Pharisee could build his dwelling.

Gratitude to God is the firm foundation for us, too. Today you'll see that we've discreetly and tastefully distributed pledge brochures and envelopes throughout the pews. Note that top side of the pledge envelope asks you to list particular blessings you've known in 2019. Be sure to complete the gratitude side of the envelope first. It's from these blessings that we derive the thanksgivings we name in the prayers and intercessions every week. What will it be for you this year? In addition to family, friends, and homes, you might list life itself, the forgiveness of sins, and all the other benefits of Christ's passion. Only then, after you've listed your blessings, should you turn to the bottom portion of the envelope and consider a number.

What number is right for you? You'll see that we're anticipating \$1.2 million in pledge income, but frankly, we've been stuck there for a number of years. So I could say that it would really invigorate the ministry of Grace Church if our annual campaign reached \$1.3 million. But if I were to say how it would really invigorate the ministry of Grace Church if our annual campaign reached \$1.3 million, I might risk the Pharisee's sideways glance as we each tried to figure out what's my share in comparison with everyone else. So I won't dwell on the notion that it would really invigorate the ministry of Grace Church if our annual campaign reached \$1.3 million. Such musing will not be part of the sermon. Instead, we talk about giving a percentage of our incomes. The tithe is ten-percent. But if the tithe seems like too much too soon, then keep your blessings in mind and choose a percentage that feels grateful. Be intentional and be grateful. Gratitude renovates the soul and prepares in us a mansion fit for the Lord of hosts.

Earlier this week I was listening to an interview of the highly acclaimed New York City author and journalist, Pete Hamill. Hamill was talking about his parents who emigrated from Ireland in the 1920s, and the type of home they created for him. He said this:

I remember one time after the war, I was about 12 and my father had a job in the factory across the way. And because he had lost his leg he had a stump, and a wooden, artificial leg. And in the summer (and there's nothing quite as ferocious as a New York August) he would work on this assembly line eight hours a day. And he was home that night and I heard him weeping in the dark around 1 o'clock in the morning. And I knew that no matter what I ever did (I couldn't articulate it exactly) that I had to honor that pain – that you must honor that. I think that's what the children of immigrants do, all of us. We know what they gave up. They gave up their countries, in some cases they gave up their languages. They worked at the lousiest, rottenest jobs in order to put food on our tables. We have to honor that for the rest of our lives.<sup>1</sup>

By "honoring that pain," Hamill was talking about living a life of gratitude for all that his parents did for him. With our pledges we mean to do the same thing: thanking God for all the blessings of this life, lifting high the cross, and even honoring that pain.

The Psalmist proclaimed: *How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord.* It is gratitude that expands and renovates the soul, and prepares in us a mansion where the living God is pleased to dwell.

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<sup>1</sup> *New York: A Documentary Film, Episode 4.* Directed by Ric Burns, 1999.