

Sermon 19/10/27

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Psalm 65 (NRSV)

Praise is due to you,
O God, in Zion;
and to you shall vows be performed,
O you who answer prayer!
To you all flesh shall come.
When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,
you forgive our transgressions.
Happy are those whom you choose and bring near
to live in your courts.
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
your holy temple.

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.
By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

SERMON

(I need to recognize and acknowledge that this sermon leans heavily on the work of Amy-Jill Levine and her book "short stories by Jesus"¹. Most of the ideas in this sermon are based on her chapter on this parable.)

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. 2014. *Short stories by Jesus*. Harper One.

Two fellows go up to the Temple to pray - one righteous and one sinful; one honored as a popular leader and respected teacher, and one despised as one deeply aligned with the Roman government. One, who has an abundance of good deeds, prays a prayer of thanksgiving, and the other, a self-identified sinner, simply asks for mercy. The upright and the fallen.

But this is a parable -parables do the unexpected. Parables are supposed to leave us without any clear cut answers, as much as we want to find them. Parables are meant to unsettle us - to upend our expected ways of seeing the world. I think this one is no different.

Parables ask us to view the world from a different angle, as does poetry. So I start with a poem that Todd Davis introduced me to:

Often I Imagine the Earth

BY DAN GERBER

Often I imagine the earth
through the eyes of the atoms we're made of—
atoms, peculiar
atoms everywhere—
no me, no you, no opinions,
no beginning, no middle, no end,
soaring together like those
ancient Chinese birds
hatched miraculously with only one wing,
helping each other fly home.

The Jian, also known as birds that fly together, are ancient Chinese mythical birds that have only one eye and one wing. These creatures are born imperfect and they need to lean against each other and act as one in order to be able to fly.²

² <https://darling-in-the-franxx.fandom.com/wiki/Jian>

Creatures that are born imperfect and need to lean against each other in order to learn to fly. Let's see how this idea plays out in today's parable.

Turn with me to the parable - we're going to look at it closely together.

Let's dive into the nitty-gritty of this parable starting with the first line - how the gospel writer, Luke, provides some clues about who this parable is aimed at. It starts, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt". Who is Jesus speaking to? Who's his audience here? "Those who trusted in themselves" doesn't necessarily refer to the Pharisees, as we may automatically assume. It may well refer to Jesus' own disciples. If you look back through chapters 17 and 18, this parable is part of a longer discourse in which Jesus gives his followers instructions on their role. So I'm going to suggest that this parable is aimed mostly at Jesus' followers, including us. It's not necessarily for the Pharisees in the crowd, it's for those who earnestly seek to follow him.

Let's go back to the text. The parable begins - "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector."

When you think of a Pharisee, what words come to mind? Yeah, I want to hear from you - what do you think when you hear the term Pharisee - words like hypocrite come to mind. It's not surprising that we think that way. Luke's depiction of the Pharisees is ambivalent at best. They do have their good points - some invite Jesus to dinner, they sometimes ask questions that aren't necessarily hostile, but the majority of Luke's references to the Pharisees are less than flattering. In Luke's gospel, they primarily they serve as negative characters who complain and condemn Jesus' every action.

But let's step back from our limited view of these religious leaders and see them as Jesus' Jewish audience might have. For the majority of them, the Pharisees would have been respected teachers who walked the walk as well as talked the talk.

And our Pharisee is remarkable. While we might be put off by his self-promoting prayer, one that some commentators label as mean-spirited, Levine suggests it follows a formula for prayer from that time, and so acceptable to those listening. His prayer is unusual in other ways - for one, it's surprising that he negatively judges the tax collector, there is contempt in his prayer. That was not expected by the audience listening to Jesus. The other surprising twist of this prayer is how it goes way beyond what's expected of him as a follower of the law. When he says "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" our Pharisee has done what was commanded, and much, much more. Those listening might have been smiling at the over the top portrayal of this righteous man. You see, there's no text in the Torah that requires that everything be tithed. He was giving way more than was required. Nor is there any law for twice-a-week fasting. By such rigorous fasting and giving practices, the Pharisee is setting himself apart not only from the rogues and murderers, but also from everyone else.

For first century Jews, Jesus' description of this particular Pharisee would have been taken as a saintly type, not one regarded with scorn or dislike.

So how we read the Gospel and lay our lens of good guy/bad guy on these characters is pretty much the opposite of how the first-century Jewish audience would have heard the parable. Our sympathies are with the tax collector and not at all with the Pharisee, right?

We come by that honestly...because Luke portrays tax collectors as sinners on their way to redemption - in this gospel they come to John for baptism, they dine with Jesus, a tax collector named Levi becomes one of his disciples, and the most celebrated of

them all, the chief tax collector Zacchaeus, is transformed through his encounter with Jesus. That's a whole lot different than how the first-century Jews experienced them. For those in Jesus' time, the tax collector is the agent of Rome, not the agent of God. He would have most likely been corrupt, rich and despised by the locals. Ours here in this parable has likely shown no mercy to others.

The presence of the tax collector in the Temple, therefore, is an unexpected twist for Jesus' listeners. He was a traitor to his people. If we were one of Jesus disciples, listening, this image of a tax collector in the Temple praying would be unexpected, unsettling and not quite in line with our expectations. We might say 'what's going on here?'

This parable has almost set us up to see one character as good and the other as the bad guy, leading us into the dualistic, judgemental system that Jesus speaks against throughout his ministry. That type of thinking leads us into the response, 'thank you God that I am not like the Pharisee'. Once we negatively judge one character and promote the other, the parable traps us.

I admit, I find myself slipping into that place pretty easily sometimes, especially around political matters. This week, on a cold morning, I was sitting in what's becoming my favorite chair in my living room, feet propped up, studying, I looked out the window across the room, and what do I notice? The view from that angle is dominated by the American flag draped over my neighbors balcony, and large political signs hanging beside it. Oh the temptation to pray 'thank you God that I'm not like that...' I so quickly become judgmental. I find a hardness of heart within myself, and it's sinful. Sinful because it's seeing us as different - as my way being the right way. I stop seeing my neighbor as one with his own story. I stop seeing as as connected. Maybe we both have only one wing with which to fly.

I need to see my contempt and choose another way - choose Jesus' way. We are interwoven, my neighbor and I.

There's one more piece of this puzzle we need to examine - a possible key that moves this from good guy/bad guy, to a more challenging call for us. So stay with me, it's a little technical.

In our parable, where it says 'I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other', the simple preposition, in Greek, *para*, used to refer to the Pharisee, is translated here, and by many Biblical scholars as 'rather than'. This man went down to his home justified *rather than* the other. This portrays the tax collector as justified and the Pharisee as not. It's a legitimate translation, but that preposition, *para*, can have multiple translations. That pesky preposition can mean 'rather than', but it can also mean 'because of' or 'alongside'. So the parable might end more like this: 'this man went down to his home justified alongside the other', or even 'because of the other'.

Alongside..., because of - we each only have one wing and need the other to fly.

The translations 'alongside' and 'because of' make more sense in historical context and makes it more challenging for us, the reader. You see, Judaism is very much a communitarian movement, with prayers being plural "our Father...give us...forgive us..." Judaism is rooted in the belief that each member of the community is responsible for the other. This concern for community responsibility means that the sin of one person can negatively impact everyone else. AND it means that the good deeds of one person can have a positive impact on the lives of others. We are interwoven. What you do impacts me, for the good or the bad, and what I do impacts you. We are connected, whether we want to be or not. To fly, we need each other.

For the listeners of this parable, they might conclude that the tax collector has tapped into the merit of the Pharisee, who has more good deeds and protection than he could possibly need. Their understanding of religion was that as one person's sin can create a stain on the entire community, so one person's righteousness can save it.

First Century Jews understood this transfer of good deeds - one person's faithfulness allows others to be justified. They understood their interconnectedness. The good one person did impacted others, as did the bad. For many Christians, this is their understanding of Jesus' going to the cross. Jesus' complete faithfulness to God and his mission in the world is here for all of us, always. What one person does matters.

Jean Paul Lederach, a Mennonite who's work in reconciliation has taken him to war torn places around the world, refers to these types of people as the 'critical yeast' - there only needs to be a few in a community - not enough to start an uprising, but a few incredible people. People who are thinking about the web of relationships.

What I love about this parable is that the Pharisee had no intention of being 'critical yeast' for the tax collector. He saw him as unredeemable. But this parable might be suggesting that God's grace and mercy might just use the unlikely and unexpected to bring about the kingdom.

Divine grace can't be limited. If we limit grace, we limit God. Maybe, just maybe God uses the unlikely and unexpected to bring about the kingdom.

That's hard for us to hear sometimes - this unlimited generosity can be problematic for us. We're happy when we are saved, less happy when this grace is extended to people we don't like or don't think are deserving.

I went up to the rally on campus this week protesting 2 speakers from the alt-right - men who spread racist, homophobic, violent rhetoric. Their ideas are full of hate and fear. In no way do I condone their message, but when I hear others who desire tolerance calling them derogatory names I find myself squirm. That's not helping to bring the kingdom of God here, now. We need a collective imagination that allows us to speak our truth without making the other less than human. We need to speak to the injustices around us - the injustice our government is supporting is not in line with Jesus' way. We need to speak out for policies that focus on our interwovenness.

The Good News of this parable is also uncomfortable news. Jesus is calling us to move away from seeing the other as an object, from making them the enemy, and to love them. We are all interwoven.

The Jews listening to Jesus believed that just as one person's sin can create a stain on the entire community, so one person's righteousness can save it.

One person's faithfulness, like the faithfulness of our Pharisee, allows others to be justified. They understood their interconnectedness. The good one person did impacted others, as did the bad. What we do matters.

God uses the unlikely and unexpected to bring the kingdom. I had a few glimmers of that kingdom this week -

A parent from the Delta school was telling me about the recent trip she was on that took 40 students down south to experience different parts of the Civil Rights movement. She told about the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, in Montgomery Alabama, part of Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative. It's the nation's first memorial dedicated to the legacy of black people terrorized by lynching. The memorial has over 800 steel structures, one for each county in the United States where a lynching took place, with the names of the victims engraved on the structures. There are more than 4400 names

documented there. This mom got choked up talking about how some of the students on the trip were trying to read each and every name aloud as a way of honoring those who were killed. It was a symbolic gesture of justice; of claiming our interwovenness.

God uses the unlikely and unexpected to bring the kingdom.

I was gifted on Friday morning with the opportunity to take part in the weekly Quaker practice of sitting in silence with the Friends School. What a moment of collective imagination!

After sitting in silence for several minutes - with preschoolers sitting, legs crossed, some with ants in their pants, quietly wiggling at my feet all the way up to eighth graders in their chairs - in the midst of the silence, one of the children stood and said in a clear voice, 'the query of the day is: How do you let your light shine?' and sat down.

How do you let your light shine?

Out of the silence in the room a few inspired students stood and spoke their answer to that provocative question.

Be kind
make a new friend
thank those who care for you
treat others as you want to be treated
say please and thank you.

Nothing monumental. Kindergarteners spoke, older children spoke. The collective moral imagination reminded me that we are all connected. We all have work to do.

Speaking up against hate. Thanking those who clean our hospital rooms, who take our temperatures, who love us. Treating others as Jesus taught us.

This parable is hard work. It's hard news wrapped up in Good News. We must examine the hardened places in ourselves, noticing when we create barriers, when we automatically move into the space of creating good guys and bad guys.

Moving away from our belief that we can fly on our own takes effort.

The Good News is that it's nothing new. Jesus called out his followers. He named their tendency to condemn, to create a good guys, bad guys attitude, and he showed them another way. He shows us another way. It's hard work, AND it's work that's full of abundance. God's love is not small, it doesn't run out, it's big and wide. Jesus calls us, again and again, to open up these hardened spaces within ourselves, to recognize that

God uses the unlikely and unexpected to bring the kingdom, here and now.