

Sermon 22.10.23

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Luke 18: 9-14

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in their own self-righteousness and regarded others with contempt: 'Two people went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed like this: "I give you thanks, O God, that I am not like others - greedy, crooked, adulterous - 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 person went home justified rather than the other. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

SERMON:

I want to recognize David Lose, preaching contributor to "A Sermon for Every Sunday" for many of the insights shared here.¹

I met Dorcas when she was in her 80's - she had served most of her adult life as a missionary overseas - decades spent serving, living in rough conditions, living on little, giving and giving some more. When she returned to the States in retirement, she had little financially, and yet she continued to volunteer tirelessly- teaching children's Sunday school and the like.

When we met, Dorcas knew she was dying and, she admitted, she was quietly terrified. I was puzzled by her fear, this devoutly religious woman - from the outside, she looked like the model humble servant. But for Dorcas, it boiled down to the question: Was she acceptable in God's sight?

¹ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/David-Lose-Pharisee-and-Tax-Collector.pdf>

She hadn't admitted to anyone in her congregation that she was afraid to die. And her doubts hounded her: Would she be seen as worthy before God on judgment day? She held all her successes - her accomplishments done in the name of faith - and wondered how she stacked up against the others in the pews on Sunday morning. Was she, a sinner, worthy of God's mercy?

Dorcas' fear speaks to me of how we miss Jesus' central message, and I think this parable has something to tell us about ourselves and about God.

"Two people went up to the Temple to pray," the parable begins, and then ends a few verses later by concluding, "And one went down to his home justified." In between is a story that most of us find pretty straightforward. One of the two persons is pretty confident of themselves. They are a Faith Leader, one who has devoted their life to their faith and to their place of worship.

And yet, as soon as we hear it, we know that one's prayer should not be our prayer:

"Dear God, I thank you that I am not like other people: greedy, crooked, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector." Right? Somehow this is not the prayer exemplar. 'Thank God I'm not like HIM'...

Now, the tax collector Jesus refers to is also in the Temple praying, but he stands at a distance from the Pharisee, away from the center where people normally gather. His prayer is quite different. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." This is the one, Jesus says, who returned to his home justified. And there you have it, the moral of the story: don't be proud or arrogant like the Pharisee, but instead humble like the tax collector. Easy-peasy.

PARABLES ARE NOT EASY PEASY...

If you've taken anything from this series on the parables, you'll know that this way of teaching that Jesus uses - telling parables - is a way of teaching that is meant to make us see differently - to change us, the listener, again and again. To turn upside down our understanding of ourselves and our understanding of God.

So - this is not an easy-peasy story. Not time to end this sermon quite yet.

Let's go back to that Pharisee, that religious leader. You see, the Pharisee is actually right. He is not like other people. He is not a thief or a trouble-maker or an adulterer. He is definitely not like the tax collector, someone who worked for the Romans, actually collecting huge sums of money from his fellow Jews to help pay for the Roman army's occupation of Israel.

In fact, when the Pharisee goes on, we realize he's not just right, but actually righteous: "I fast twice a week," he says, "And I give a tenth of my income."

This guy is like the Mother Teresa of faithful righteousness - he's gone way above and beyond. Nowhere in the scriptures does it say someone should fast that often, or give away that much... He's a super-star model of righteous living.

To be righteous, according to Scripture, is to live your life in accord with the law of Israel.

The better you are at keeping the law, the more righteous you are. Now, we don't use the word "righteous" that much anymore, but we could easily translate it as "successful."

If you are good at investment banking, you are righteous according to the standards of Wall Street. If you're popular at school, we might say you are socially righteous.

In the Pharisee's case, he is successful at keeping the law of Israel. So this Pharisee is both right – he is not like other people – and righteous – he has been very successful at living his faith.

But he is not, Jesus says, justified.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, is pretty much the opposite. He is a failure at keeping the law. No one looks at him as a success and no one would call him righteous. Far from it, most of his neighbors – off of whom he makes his living – probably despise him.

The tax collector is like the Bernie Madoff's of the world - that wall street financier who ran the biggest Ponzi scheme ever - cheating thousands of investors of their life savings. Hated by all.

And the tax collector knows this, standing at the edge of the Temple – standing there because he works for the Romans, and so he's not ritually clean. Not ritually clean means not welcomed into the Temple. Yet here he is, getting as close as he possibly can to God's sanctuary, lifting his eyes toward heaven, simply asking for mercy.

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

This is the one, Jesus says, who is justified.

Why? Because while righteousness is about what we accomplish, about our success, to be justified is to be deemed righteous no matter what we have done simply because God says so.

To be justified is not up to us - it's up to God.

In this parable the Pharisee leads a blameless life and for this reason is righteous. The tax collector does not lead a blameless life but asks God for mercy, asks God to look at her and judge her not based on what she has done but instead to look at her and

To judge her based on who God is – compassionate, loving, and merciful.

And this is what makes this parable kind of tricky. Because when you read it in a straightforward way – don't be self-righteous like the Pharisee, but instead be humble like the tax collector – we might as well end up praying, "God, we thank you that we are not like other people: conspiracy believing hypocrites, or even like that Pharisee..." We may be righteous, but we are not justified.

And that's the thing: righteousness, success, is never enough. Why?

Because righteousness is based on our abilities and accomplishments. And no matter what we do - we will eventually fall short.

Even more, it's based on comparisons. Notice: righteousness and success are always measured relative to how the people around us are doing. The Pharisee can't escape this, and neither can we.

Which brings me back to Dorcas...

She feared that God's mercy was based on her own righteousness, her own success, not on who God is - compassionate, loving, and merciful.

If we make it about us, we're never enough.

The good news, and the hard news, is that judging, comparing, building up our resume of righteous acts - that's not Jesus' way.

And boy, that's a hard one for us to get. Even the disciples keep tripping up over this idea of God's love and mercy being deep and wide (hum deep and wide...)

You see, if we keep reading the text after this parable, the very next thing that happens is that some parents bring their kids to Jesus that he might simply touch them - to lay a hand on them and bless them - and what happens? The disciples tell them to scram - get away from the Teacher, he doesn't have time for them. And what does Jesus say? (Ask the audience)

He says *“Let the little children come to me, and don’t stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. For whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child” — that is, with unassuming openness, vulnerability, and a playful, free, utter reliance on God — “they will never enter it”* (Luke 18:17)

When children are well loved by their parents, they know - they know they don’t have to earn it. When we parent (and I use that term loosely - loving anyone’s child, not just our own is a moment of parenting), when we parent well, the child knows, knows deep inside, where there are no words, that love is always there, no matter what. That’s what God’s love is like, says Jesus.

I remember a time when my kids were young - I was working outside and my boys - 3 boys, they were playing around and in the house, playing in a way that wasn’t so fun for everyone. And Jesse, my youngest son, got mad. Really mad, so mad at his big brothers that when they locked him out of the house, excluding him, he punched the glass on the front door to let himself in. The glass shattered, his hand was bloody, and all that fooling around came to an abrupt halt. They came running to find me - worried, ashamed, hurt, bleeding. They came, and thankfully, at that moment in time, I was able to be a parent who loved, simply loved them - who opened my arms wide and held them all - in their shame, in their hurt. As children they knew where to turn - they turned to love.

Jesus says to his followers in our parable and in what follows - you can’t earn self-justification, no matter how righteous and successful you are - you can’t earn it. Instead, instead - become like a little child, God’s child, receiving God’s love and care, which is exactly who you are...

These parables call us to a new way of seeing - of living the upside down kingdom Jesus brings - not based on success, not keeping score.

In the end, then, this parable is an invitation, not a condemnation, for the Pharisees of the world. *Let go of your pretense, and receive God’s kingdom as a child would receive it: as a delightful, undeserved gift. The good news of the Gospel is that salvation isn’t your work to do, it’s God’s.*

If the Pharisee in this parable is a sinner — well, he can join the club. In that regard he is no different than the tax collector, and come to think of it, since the tax collector went home justified, who can we exclude from God’s mercy?

The answer, it turns out, is easy - no one.

All those who recognize their need. All those who look to God.

All of them are loved and welcomed by the One who is loving, gracious, and merciful. Welcome not based on acts of righteousness, but because of who they are - God's beloved children.

Have mercy on me, a sinner - a prayer that is received in love, by the One who is merciful.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

(musical interlude followed by confession and cairn building - see below)

Confessional/cairn building time:

This is a time when we silently name our recognition of how we forget - we forget the bigness of God's love - and so we act in small ways, ways that are not loving or expansive, but comparing and fearful - ways that don't recognize God at work in us and through us.

After a spoken confession, you're welcome to bring that rock you brought in with you, or get one from the basket up front here, to place that rock that symbolizes - the fear, the judging attitudes, the million and one way we forget - forget that God's love is so wide and so big, that we really don't understand it.

Bring that rock and leave it here today. No need to take that home with you. Leave those attitudes behind.

Confession

Leader: O God, have mercy on me!

Because of your love and your great compassion,
wipe away my faults;
wash me clean of my guilt;
purify me of my sin.

All: O God, have mercy on me!

Leader: For I am aware of my faults,
and have my sin constantly in mind.
I sinned against you alone,
and did what is evil in your sight.

All: O God, have mercy on me!

Leader: Teach me your wisdom!
Purify me, wash me, instill some joy into me;
Turn your face from my sins,
And wipe out all my guilt.

All: O God, have mercy on me!