

Sermon Notes October 23rd, 2022

Sermon Text: Luke 18:9-14

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14, The Message

9-12 He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’”

13 “Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’”

14 Jesus commented, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

Sermon

The Pharisee is Bad.

The Tax Collector is Good.

That’s my story and I am sticking to it.

For many years, that was probably my thought and possibly my theology. Over the years though, I have realized that there is so much more to this story.

Over the last few decades, I probably have heard many bible lessons and sermons that were very dangerous. It is easy to do because like me in the past, on the first read through, this story seems very simple.

Stacey and I recently began watching or re-watching Law & Order. In that show and others, you may hear the phrase “this is open and shut case.” The phrase, broadly speaking, is intended to convey the idea that there is such an overwhelming amount of evidence that a conclusion can be drawn about a suspect or defendant’s guilt without having to go to trial.

While it’s true that these kinds of cases do occur in real life to a certain extent, most criminal cases are not nearly that simple.

In fact, it’s entirely possible for a defendant to go on trial, facing what looks like an insurmountable amount of evidence against them, only to have a jury find them not guilty.

I think that can be often the case with the passage that we read. So, today, I want to explore this parable with more depth than normal and see where it may lead us.

We have two characters in the story, just like last week. Last week, we had the judge and the widow. This week, we have the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

In the story, we see that the Pharisee is identified by the trust that he has in his own righteousness and the contempt that he had for others. When we take a look at the Tax Collector, I want to take a look at a component that I believe is often overlooked. The Tax Collector did not retaliate.

The story plays out that they are both in the temple together. I have to tell you that as she is sharing this story, the listeners had to be shocked. What, the tax collector is in the temple? Here is what happens. Listen in again to the prayer of the Pharisee. He prays:

Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man.

The tax collector hears this prayer. The Pharisee is obviously looking down upon at the tax collector and calling him out. Yet, the tax collector does not call him out and he does not retaliate.

Instead the tax man is slumped in the shadows with his face in his hands. He does not dare to look up and he lifts up the following prayer:

“God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.”

He does not retaliate. There are many times in our lives when individuals may attack us or look down upon us and we have a choice. If the tax collector retaliated or if we retaliate to those who attack us, then we just make ourselves equal to the arrogant Pharisee. While I believe that there is a lot that we could do with that thought, I want to press on because I want to help us connect the whole narrative of Luke.

This story is on the immediate heels of last weeks text. In case you forget or if you weren't here last week, let me quickly catch you up. We had two characters last week: the judge and the widow. The widow was extremely persistent in wanting justice and the judge eventually dealt with the case to get her away.

Today, we once again have two characters. This time, it is a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. Last week, the poor widow wants to be vindicated. This week, the tax collector goes home vindicated.

This is where my mind wandered off too as I was thinking about Stacey and I watching Law & Order, the judge and persistent widow and then today the Pharisee and tax collector. We often think of vindication in a competitive form. We want the judgment to come down for us and against them. Thus, I imagine that the Pharisee is standing in the temple and sees God has a judge who will render their verdict. One will win and one will lose and the Pharisee presents a slam dunk case. There is no way that he is going to lose, so he stands there proud and confident.

Now, I want to hit pause for a moment. Too many times, we look at the stories that Jesus share and we often throw the Pharisees under the bus. They were simply using the law to give them clear guidance on how they can live a holy life and a life they believed that God wanted them to live.

What happened then and still happens today is that the law becomes a way that divides individuals up into winners and losers. The Pharisees view and our view unmask this fundamental misunderstanding of who God is and what God is like.

In my life and journey that has spread the spectrum in how churches interpret the scripture and view God, I have seen many who believe that the God of the universe is a God who is picky and choosy and I believe that this parable is another example that our view of God may not be accurate.

The Pharisee truly is a perfect reflection of the God that he believes in. He rejoices because he knows without a shadow of a doubt that there are not many who could match his compliance with the law. In his thinking, he feels and believes that God is just like him. He divides people up and places some in the winning circle and everyone else who does not measure up are outside of the circle. They are the rejects and the losers, just like that tax-collector.

There are many individuals and churches that still operate in that manner. We have our checklist of how individuals should live and what they should be doing. There is a sense that God is measuring how well we are living our lives. Then each of us have a different measuring stick. For some it is Sabbath-Keeping, for some, it is church attendance. For others, it is how well we are parenting. Then some believe it is about patriotism. Then for others, it is about how green we are. Now, we may not be as drastic as the Pharisee and stand up in public and congratulate how we are winning and how the others are losing BUT we do make notes on how others are not living up to our standards.

That is not what the law was designed for. The biblical law was intended to show us that it is not possible to earn God's acceptance and that we needed to lean into God's love and grace. Here is what we need to know about the law: the law was not to provide us with a way to divide us up as better and worse. It was

to show us that we are all in the same boat. Today's parable was to show that the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector were in the same boat.

A few weeks ago, on Wednesday night, we were talking about how God cares about what is good for us and God wants us to love others. However, God is not ranking us from the best to the worst. God is not drawing a circle and moving some into the accepted circle and pushing others outside of the circle and rejecting them.

Hear this good news: God wants everyone! God longs to welcome you in. God wants to seat you in honor at the banqueting table. God wants every single one of us. The tax-collector went home justified because the tax-collector puts his trust entirely in God's mercy and not in his ability.

As Lutherans, we have made a promise in our baptismal vows that we will proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed. We need to take the Good News that we have heard today and proclaim that news with everyone we encounter. Let them know that no matter what, God loves you and God welcomes you. Isn't that some great news to be able to proclaim?

As I stand behind the altar and see the bread and the cup, I am always reminded that there are no qualifications to come to the table. All are welcome. Jesus invites everyone to the table. That is why I proclaim all are welcome. I would be failing if I turned individuals away from the table.

How can we extend this love, grace and good news to everyone that we meet? We are able to do this because we have been freed to live into righteousness because we have been given that gift from God. Jesus has promised us, once again, in this story of the tax-collector that we are already loved and accepted by God. Friends, God has showered us with love, grace and mercy. Now, may we depart from this holy space and shower on another with that same love, grace, and mercy. When we do depart from this space after the meal that we will partake in, we will know that we are forgiven, beloved and we go home justified.

AMEN