

THERE, BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD . . . ?

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus was a storyteller.

Of course, we *know* that already.

It's one of the most well-known facts about Jesus.

But do we really know *why* he told so many stories?

A quick common-sense answer might be that he told stories to more effectively get across his points, like preachers and politicians are taught to do. People will *remember* a story. So if you want someone to remember a point, put it in a story.

I'd agree with that, except for one thing.

Jesus *told* us the reason, and it's the exact opposite.

Once, when his disciples asked him why he told stories, he told them it was so people *won't* understand.

"To you *disciples*," Jesus said,

"I tell the secrets of the kingdom of God.

But to *others* I speak in parables, so that looking they may *not* perceive,

and listening they may *not* understand."

That statement of Jesus used to always bother me.

Why would Jesus want to hide the truths of the kingdom from the public?

Didn't he come to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom?

Didn't Jesus *want* people to enter the kingdom?

But now . . . I *think* . . . I get what Jesus meant.

You see, if you just tell someone the way it is, and they "understand"—

that is, they respect you as the authority,

and they believe, and accept it,

then they've finished wrestling with it.

They understand. And they're done. It's settled.

The truth sticks, but doesn't *necessarily* transform.

But kingdom truth is *not* just for information.

It's aimed at formation. And *trans*-formation.

As I said in my Pentecost sermon last Sunday, the Holy Spirit *trans*-forms.

So Jesus told stories.

Because stories—*especially* the kind of stories Jesus told, ones that were a little off-kilter, surprising, disturbing, enigmatic, mysterious—

those kind of stories you have to let hang in the air for a while, ponder them, live with them, enter *into* them, and wrestle with them.

It's in the struggle that we might get transformed.

As Will Willimon said,

Jesus' stories are meant "more to dislodge than explain."

Or another way to put it,

they take us from a settled place of complacency and security, into a journey of struggle and growth and discovery.

So we will spend this summer listening to Jesus' stories, and wrestling with them, I hope.

Some will take more wrestling than others.

But today we have the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

At first glance, this is a very simple story.

It seems we hardly *have* to wrestle with it.

There is no complicated plot.

No character development, no rising tension, or sudden crisis.

There is no perplexing dilemma, no mystery or problem to be solved.

Just one simple scene.

It has as much complexity as the old joke that begins,

"Two guys walked into a bar."

It's just about that simple.

Except in *this* case, two guys walked into a temple.

These guys were two stereotypes, really.
Everyone in Jesus' audience immediately knew the characters.
Two men went into the temple to pray.
One was a righteous Pharisee.
The other a sinful tax collector.
The Pharisee prayed looking to heaven,
"I thank you God, that I'm not unclean or sinful,
like that tax collector over there."
The tax collector prayed,
"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The people hearing Jesus tell this story knew *exactly*
what these characters represented.
We might need some help.

The Pharisee was a highly-esteemed,
and a truly beloved leader of that religious community.
Public opinion toward the Pharisees was consistently high.
Pharisees were the heroes of the common people,
in contrast to the more elite rival party, the Sadducees
Pharisees identified with Moses and the prophets,
while Sadducees were identified with
priestly privilege and prerogative.
The priests—most of whom were Sadducees—
would adjust temple worship rituals to satisfy the Pharisees.
They didn't want to offend the people,
who nearly *always* sided with the Pharisees.

And it's no wonder people thought so highly of them.
They were such good people.
Good in the sense of being holy people.
They cared about staying holy and pure,
because they believed with a *passion*,
that is what God wanted of them.
And they wanted what God wanted.
What purer motivation could there *be*?

The religious life of the Jewish people was in a bad way.
People were forgetting their spiritual roots.

Religious life was losing its vigor.
And the Pharisees were all about renewal—
spiritual and religious renewal.

They were concerned about being pure
and avoiding contact with evil,
not because they were stuck up or arrogant
or hated people who were considered unclean.
They believed if the people of Israel could achieve religious purity,
as God desired,
then the Messiah might come and deliver them.
So out of their sincere faith, and hope for salvation,
Pharisees avoided contact with heathens,
or even their *own* people who were unclean.
Some Pharisees even walked the streets with their eyes closed,
or wore a special hat to cover their eyes,
just so they would not risk the chance
of seeing any impurities or indecencies.
This group became known as the "Bruised or Bleeding Pharisees,"
because they had so many injuries from bumping into things.

Pharisees were good people.
And they did it all for good reasons.
They did it all for God.
They did it all for salvation.
Who can *fault* them?

So a Pharisee went into the temple to pray, Jesus said.
And there in the temple, way off in a far corner,
he saw another man praying—a tax collector—
the very kind of person that the Pharisee needed,
for noble religious reasons, to avoid contact with.

Tax collectors were despicable by anyone's standards.
If you've ever complained about the IRS,
its inefficiency or injustice,
then you aren't familiar with the Roman tax system.
The Roman empire found it easier to get their money,

if they didn't have to do it themselves,
so they contracted it out to private business,
whose task was simply to deposit a certain amount
of money into the Roman treasury,
and to get it by whatever means necessary.

So big private companies were formed,
with the top administrators in Rome,
then regional managers under them,
and individual tax collectors under *them*,
usually natives of the region.

Everyone, from the top on down,
was in it for personal gain.
And they had a lot to gain.
They got wealthy by overcharging,
or taking bribes,
or extorting money from their own people.

So this Jewish tax collector praying in the temple
represented everything evil
that the Pharisee spent his whole life working *against*.
This person was unclean not *only*
because he sold out to the heathen, idol-worshiping, enemy of Israel,
but he turned against his own people,
and got rich off of doing it.
The tax collector was the worst kind of scoundrel.
I can't imagine *anyone* more despicable to a Pharisee
than a Jewish tax collector—the epitome of evil.

It's surprising enough that the Pharisee even allowed this unclean man
to be in his line of sight.

It's *no* surprise at *all* that he would have prayed a heart-felt prayer,
“*Thank you, Lord, that I didn't end up like that man over there.*”

But not knowing the context, we don't look at the situation that way.
We're quick to point fingers at the Pharisee,
say he should have been more accepting.
We identify the Pharisee as a stuck-up, self-absorbed,
self-righteous, nit-picker,
a religious hypocrite who gets some kind of crude pleasure

out of condemning other persons.
And we identify this grief-stricken tax collector as
a decent ordinary person caught in a bad system,
humbly coming to God for forgiveness.

I even have a mental image of this scene.
Don't know where it came from.
Maybe from a picture in the *Egermeier's Bible Story Book*
my mother read to me when I was a child.
My picture is a well-dressed Pharisee,
standing in his regal robe,
with rich accessories, and gemstones, and fancy headpiece,
proud hands raised toward heaven.
And off in the far corner,
is this humble-looking figure of the tax collector,
bent over double by the weight of his guilt,
dressed perhaps in sackcloth and ashes.

If *anyone* was dressed in a regal robe,
it was the tax collector.
He was *certainly* the wealthier of the two.
I bet he had more rings on his fingers
than the Pharisee could ever *hope* to own.
It was the *Pharisee* who was just an ordinary religious person
trying to follow God's way,
trying to live a holy, principled, moral, and ethical life,
because *that* was what God wanted.

For *most* of us, I suspect, and *certainly* for me,
if we begin to put ourselves into this story,
there is no question which character *we* are.
We are the Pharisee.
And that is *not* a spiritual *slam*.
Being a Pharisee, *per se*, was *not* the problem.
Jesus took no issue with those who sought to live holy lives.

The Pharisee's sin was in how he positioned himself.
By his attitude and his corresponding prayer,
he separated himself from the enemy,

he made a distinction between himself and the sinful person.
He could not see the common human connection
that could have formed a relationship,
that could have been *trans*-formative for them both.

Whenever we thank God we're *not* like someone else,
we write that person off.
We undermine our ability to ever connect
and have a transformative relationship with that person.

Thank God I'm *not* like one of *those people*!
How often have we made *that* sort of comment?
or at least had that sentiment?
But that drives us away from the other,
it creates distance, it reinforces our enmity,
and *worst* of all, it blocks the grace of God.

All of us, at one time or another have *surely* quoted the saying,
"There, but for the grace of God, go I."
The supposed origin of the phrase is John Bradford, mid-16th century,
who said, as he watched prisoners being led to execution,
"There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford."

The implication behind that saying is actually a noble one, I'm sure.
It's a statement of humility.
I didn't get where I am on my own.
It was outside factors—God's grace, my upbringing, whatever—
that made me who I am.

But it's a very small step to go from,
"There, but for the grace of God . . ." to
"Thank God, I am not like *that* sinner."

To innocently say, as *I* often have, "There, but for the grace of God . . ."
at least implies that the *other* unfortunate person
lies *outside* the grace of God.
And I have effectively done exactly what the Pharisee did,
stood upright, back turned, and created a safe distance
between my *own* sin and depravity,

and that of the other.

When we create spiritual distance between ourselves and those near us,
we undermine the grace of God.

It's a little hard for me to accept this,
because *I* am one of the good people.
But Jesus has bad news for good people.
We cannot bank on our goodness to bring us favor with God.
In fact, our goodness might even *get in the way*—
if it keeps us from seeing our need.

The tax collector's need was obvious.
He *knew* he was in trouble.
He *knew* he was not on good terms with God.
He just never had the courage to admit it, or act on it,
because the money was too good.

But on that decisive day, in Jesus' story,
he submitted himself to the judgement of God.
"God, *have mercy on me, a sinner.*"
To cry for mercy, is to admit our life is in the hands of another.
That's not *easy* for good people to do.

So let's start with the assumption we are the good people. The Pharisees.
From where we stand, who are the tax collectors?
Who are those who stand for something we can't stand?

In this age of widening political polarization,
a growing number of church splits,
and an ever *deeper* emotional divide that pits against each other,
East and West,
Christian and Muslim,
Arab and Jew . . .
that creates thick walls, even in the church, between
immigrant and native-born,
pro-choice and pro-life,
straight and gay,

creationists and evolutionists,
hawk and dove,
Democrat and Republican,
developers and environmentalists . . .

In this anxious and polarized age,
it shouldn't take us much time or effort to identify,
from where we stand, in our goodness,
who the tax collectors are in our minds.

Every single one of us in this room, including *me*,
should not find it difficult to name those persons or groups,
about whom we have said, or thought,
“Thank God I am not like them.”

Our whole cultural discourse is built around the statement,
“Thank God I'm not like them!”

It's a prayer we pray *all* the time.
But it's a prayer, I submit, that is spiritually toxic.
It impedes the grace of God in our lives.
It keeps us from “going home justified,”
which is how the tax collector went home, according to Jesus.

The prayer *we* must learn to pray—
against our intuition,
against the tide of culture—
is, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

That is the prayer that will not only put us right with God,
but will be a foundation upon which we can build
a transformative relationship with those around us
who are so difficult to bear,
hard to understand, or
impossible to love.

May we learn how to pray that prayer.

In fact, let us pray that *now*.

I invite us to a time of confession.

First, if you would turn to #92 in the green book, *Sing the Journey*.

I will lead us in a prayer of confession,
followed by a time of meditation,
during which you might identify the tax collectors in your life,
and then pray on your own behalf,
“God be merciful to me, a sinner!”
After which we will sing together.

Let us pray.

Holy God, before whose face we are not made righteous
even by being right:
free us from the need to justify ourselves
by our own anxious striving,
that we may be abandoned to faith in you alone,
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

[silent meditation]

In the words of the prophet Isaiah,
“You shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”

—Phil Kniss, June 19, 2011