

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 23, 2016
Pentecost 23
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 14:1-21
Psalm 84
2 Timothy 4:6-18
Luke 18:9-14

Our Gospel lesson this morning from Luke is a continuation of last week's text, in that these two stories or parables are paired together.

In last week's text about the persistent widow, we saw that the theme was one of *vindication*. To people who were facing tough circumstances, Jesus impressed upon them the need to persevere in their prayer for God's kingdom to come in its fullness. The message to these troubled believers was that God *will* come to vindicate them and set the world right, in spite of the fact that God often seems delayed and the people find themselves asking: *How Long, O Lord?*

So, in the parable of the persistent widow, the message seems to be that God, in God's good time, will come and put things right, especially for the saints or the faithful ones.

Today's text seems to carry the same message of vindication, but with a different slant.

This parable, like others Jesus told, would have been a serious "shock" to those who heard it. In this case, the audience is comprised of *religious leaders* and

Pharisees. And as I read the story again this week, I found the place where I “stub my toe” in the story. I learned that where I encounter problems is in the way I view the Pharisee and the tax collector in the story.

And what I tend to do – what we all may be tempted to do – is to view the Pharisee as a *villain*, and the Tax Collector as a *hero*.

But let’s try to put ourselves in the skin of those who first heard this story. From that point of view, if there was anyone within the community of Judaism that *would not* go home from the temple justified, it would be a tax collector. Here was a person who worked for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people. He was a participant in a cruel, corrupt, and oppressive system and he benefited from his participation. Politically, he was considered a traitor. And religiously, he was considered “unclean.” From any point of view, a tax collector was a reprehensible character. His prayer here may be in the spirit of Psalm 51, but his life is offensive.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, shows by what he recites that his religious observance in many ways *exceeds what the law demands*. He goes above and beyond the call. This man is arrogant, to be sure, but no one can doubt his disciplined adherence to the moral and ethical code of his faith. He is the faithful, dependable tithing type who pays the salaries of ministers so that they can preach on the stories like the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

So, at least to those who originally hear this story, the Pharisee is no villain, and the tax collector is no hero. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock says it like this:

The Pharisee is not a venomous villain and the publican is not generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the good-hearted hooker. Such portrayals belong in cheap novels. If the Pharisee is pictured as a villain and the tax collector as a hero, then each gets what he deserves, there is no surprise of grace, and the parable is robbed. In Jesus' story, what both men receive is "in spite of," not "because of." When the two men are viewed in terms of character and community expectations, without labels or prejudice, the parable is still a shock, still carrying the power both to offend and to bless... (Luke: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p. 211.)

So what exactly is Jesus trying to say in this parable? As with last week's story, I believe that what Jesus is saying is influenced heavily by the *context* of this story. I'm thinking especially of the material in 17:22-37, just prior to this material.

There, Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man, and the longing of the disciples for that day to arrive. They longed for that day that would bring them final deliverance from the oppressive conditions under which they lived. They often joined the Psalmist, crying out, "How long, O Lord, will you delay?"

But the day is coming, says Jesus, when a *great reversal* will happen between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed.

In telling the parable we've heard today, I believe Jesus is saying: ***Be careful, lest you yourselves become victims of that reversal.***

Consider this. It can be easy for those of us in the Church to dwell on the fact that the day is coming when those who do evil will get what they've got coming to them.

It is easy to think about those who scorn Christ, who mock the teachings of Scripture and the Church, and to think about the day when those people who are so proud and arrogant will be cut down to size, and shown how utterly misguided they are because of their pride.

It can be easy to think about those who are wealthy and who gain that wealth on the backs of the poor and the oppressed, and to think about the day when the rich and powerful will be sent away empty-handed.

It can be easy for us to think about those who torture and brutally murder Christians simply because they are Christians, and to think about the day when such violent and cruel people will meet with a violent and cruel demise.

And if we are not careful, we can begin to think about such things with a sort of twisted pride. We can have an attitude where we take a subtle satisfaction in how all of this will play out on that day when God's kingdom arrives in its fullness.

And if we are not careful, that subtle satisfaction begins to turn into a sort of spiritual arrogance, and we begin to feel morally superior to others. And into that kind of thinking, Jesus comes and tells this story, and he says: Be careful. Be careful, lest *you yourselves* become victims of the great reversal that is coming.

In the story of the persistent widow, God will vindicate the saints. In this story, God will vindicate *not those who think they are saints, but those who humbly confess that they are sinners.*

As we come to the table this morning, I invite you to come with simple faith. Come with humility. Come with open hands and open hearts. Then rise up, touched by grace, to love and serve one another and those whom God loves.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.