

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 27, 2013
Pentecost 23
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

On the surface, our Gospel lesson today seems to be very straightforward and simple. The message seems so clear that the moral of the story is hard to miss: ***Be humble, and don't think too highly of yourself.***

But when it comes to parables, I've discovered that when things seem so simple and straightforward, I need to be careful, for I am often missing something. The very reason Jesus told parables was to "tease" the minds of his listeners into active thought, to "break up fallow ground" in order to prepare for new seed to be sown.

This parable, like others Jesus told, would have been a serious "shock" to those who heard it – in this case, the 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 *exceed what the law demands*. He goes above and beyond the call. His prayer is a modification of a common rabbinic prayer, very much in the spirit of Psalm 17:3-5:

Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing; I have resolved that my mouth will not sin. I have kept myself from the ways of the violent. My steps have held to your paths, and my feet have not slipped.

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 pay the salaries of ministers so that they can preach on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

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...But for this parable to continue To speak with power, the preacher will need to find analogous characters In our culture. (Luke: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p. 211.)

During our time of Afterword this morning, I'd like for us to think a bit, and to see if we might be able to identify any persons in our day who are like these characters.

But before we do that, let me just leave you with one last thought about what Jesus may be trying to say to us here. And it may be that what Jesus is wanting to say 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.* Be careful, lest you fall into the trap of thinking that your good works or your acts of obedience curry favor with God. Be careful, lest you think that anything about your salvation rests on our ability or your character.

As we come to the table this morning, I invite you to adopt the attitude of our prayer of confession, which states: "Lord, we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table." And, rather than boasting about our life of obedience, we can continue the theme of the prayer where it says: "where there is any sin, or any falling short of your good and perfect will, we earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for our misdoings."

Come with simple faith. Come with humility. Come with open hands and open hearts. Then rise up, being touched by grace, to love and serve those whom God loves.

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