

Sermon – October 23, 2022

“When Score-Keeping Doesn’t Work!”

Text: Luke 18: 9-14

Prayer: Let us come to you O God with a clean heart. Humble us and keep our hearts in tune with your love. Amen.

How would you feel if I started my sermon with a prayer like this?

“God, I thank you that I am not like those fundamental Christians who interprets almost every word in the Bible literally. God, I thank you that I am not like the agenda-driven progressive liberal Christians who question the doctrinal values of traditional beliefs and neither understand nor respect the holy scriptures. God, I thank you that I am not like those who support traditional values and preferential treatment of a privileged race. God, I thank you that I am not like those who only care about the issues of abortion, gay rights and climate change. God, I thank you that I work hard to have a good life and that I am not like those who depend on social assistance. God, I thank you that I am a Christian and not like those godless people out there.”

How would you feel listening to me as your minister with a litany of self-righteous praises about myself? I’m sure you will be turned off BIG TIME. Now it’s your turn. Fill in the blanks with whatever it might be for you. “God, I thank you that I am not like....”

You may not pray like the Pharisee in the parable, but have you ever expressed those kinds of opinions in conversation and in your lifestyle? Have you ever kept those thoughts to yourself in silent self-righteousness or how you treat others? The one thing we cannot in all honesty say is, “God, I thank you that I am not like the Pharisee.” Because most of the time – we are. We want to be law-abiding. We want approval of what we do. We want to be recognized of our accomplishments. But we were taught in Sunday School and the many sermons we’ve heard about this parable not to take the Pharisees’ side. We were asked to take the side of the tax collector and go home be justified.

Jesus’ parable sets a trap for us. It is not a trap to catch and condemn us as Pharisees or bring justice to the tax collector. It is not a trap to put down good works or condone wrongdoing.

Rather, it is a trap to stop us and bring us face to face with the reality of our life and our relationship with God and others. The two characters represent positions at opposite ends of the social and spiritual scale. The Pharisee was religiously righteous, the tax man extorted revenue for the Roman oppressors. The Pharisee is respectable, the tax collector despised. They represent two kinds of being religious. The Pharisee stands to pray loudly with pride about himself recounting his accomplishments, while the tax collector stood praying "far off", beating his breast, confessing his shortcomings and limitations. The religious expert was smug and confident, the outsider was anxious and insecure. The righteous man stood up, the sinful man looked down. Luke's punch line announces a reversal. *"The respectable, reputable believer, so competent and accomplished, the one who had done everything right, was rejected, whereas the secular sinner — disreputable, inadequate, and incompetent — went home justified before God."* (Dan Clendenin)

Truth be told, I have a problem with this parable. I feel that it is one of those black and white stories where we are asked to take sides. Am I like the Pharisee or the tax collector? But we need to understand one thing – the Pharisee in this parable does not represent all of the Pharisees in Jesus' time and neither the tax collector is the face of all the tax collectors. Luke used them to symbolize two kinds of religious people in prayer. Both have access to the temple – both have access to God. When I listen to the Pharisee's prayer, I can't help but wonder what is really going on here. Who is the Pharisee trying to convince? God or himself? His prayer is directed not so much to God but to himself. He is not describing his faith or spiritual practices. He keeps a tab of what he did. Every time we keep score of our own life or the life of another, we need to know that something deeper is going on. Score-keeping is the way we either deny or try to overcome the feeling of emptiness, the loss of meaning, lack of confidence or the brokenness in our lives. It is also a symptom for arrogance and pride that says "I don't need anyone in my life. I don't need God. I am more than good enough!" That's what the Pharisee was doing. He announced his wonderful deeds: "I am not a crook, a rogue, or a womanizer. I do not extort money and cheat others like this tax collector. I do not only follow the law, but I also exceed its requirements." He probably was. I do not doubt that what he says was true. The problem is that when we think we have everything – answers, doctrines, laws, piety, reputation,

wealth, fame, success – when we think we have the required number of points or even exceed them, then we have no need of God or others. We exalt ourselves and have no need for life-giving values. We choose to do what we wish to do with our lives.

Being a tax collector in Jesus' time is very different from today's context. In the first century, a tax collector was generally noted as the worst kind of crook. He was seen as colluding with the Roman rulers to extort money from his own people. He was seen as a bad guy, despised and feared. This parable certainly is not about the bad Pharisee and the good tax collector. The people of Jesus' day would have seen it as just the opposite. They are not, however, as different as we might think, for on the inside they are both deficient and lacking in something; both judged themselves poorly; both are lost, broken, and in need of God. The real difference is that the tax collector acknowledges his misgivings, his sinfulness and the Pharisee does not. The difference is that the Pharisee keeps scores while the tax collector cries out in pure honesty, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" The tax collector was missing God in his life. He proclaims that he has nothing apart from God."

This parable is an invitation to stop keeping score, but to acknowledge and hold before God, the dead places of our life: the failures and disappointments; the break ups and break downs; the emptiness, sufferings, addictions; those times when we no longer are capable to dream dreams, to have visions, or hope. To confess and acknowledge that that we are lacking - is opening ourselves in humility at the mercy of God's grace and provisions. That is what the tax collector did. His words are simple. He does not embark on an eloquent litany of his sins to match the Pharisee's virtues. The tax collector went home justified, not because he was good or better than the Pharisee, he wasn't, but because he offered not a scorecard but a confession of his brokenness. For the tax collector, God's mercy has opened the door to a new life, a new world, a new self-understanding, a new relationship. We don't know what happened after the tax collector got home. A choice now lay before him, the choice to walk into his own transformation. That does not tell us how the story ends. It tells us, rather, how it might begin.

So today, as we continue to reflect on our call as good stewards – how many of us here might go home justified? Can we truthfully say to ourselves –there are those who are greater or lesser

than me. I believe that there is a pharisee and a tax collector in each of us. But God's grace is for everyone – sinner or saint alike. Pharisee or tax collector – all of us are offered God's abundant grace. It is up for us to receive that grace.

As we have welcomed baby Lawrence and his family through the sacrament of baptism, I invite you to acknowledge BCUC as your spiritual home where both the righteous and the unrighteous, the successful and the failure, the insider and the outsider are both loved and embraced. And for many of us, it is a home of God's grace. More than memories, more than experiences, more than the physical space. In this church, there are rooms for everyone and everyone has a place. I would like you to leave this place justified!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group

David Lose, www.workingpreacher.org

Andrew King, *A Poetic Kind of Place* blog

Michael Marsh, interruptingthesilence.com