

Sermon – October 27, 2019

Coming Home Justified

Text: Luke 18: 9-14

Welcome Home! I look around the sanctuary this morning and I see a rich human diversity. I see a range of ages. I see children, youth, young adults, adult women and men. I see people with many gifts and talents and those with different kinds of challenges related to their physical mobility and abilities. We certainly come from different class backgrounds and occupy a range of economic strata, theological upbringing or even political leanings. Most people here grew up in homes that observed religious traditions. But I'm sure there are skeptics and seekers among us and those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. This is the joy and excitement of homecoming. Homecoming lifts up this central human diversity and the need to belong – all of us and all parts of us. We welcome everyone here with a warm rejoicing with the belief that you can find your sense of being at home in the world by journeying with us here at BCUC!

Today we hear a different story of homecoming. “Two men went up to the temple to pray,” the parable begins, and then ends a few verses later by concluding, “And one went down to his home justified.” In between is a story that most of us find pretty straightforward. One of the two men – the Pharisee is pretty confident of himself. He believes he is morally superior. He has devoted his life to his faith and to his synagogue. In his prayer, he listed and announced his wonderful deeds: “Dear God, I thank you that I am not a crook, a rogue, or a womanizer. I do not extort money and cheat others like this tax collector. I not only follow the law but I also exceed its requirements. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of my income.”

The Pharisee was right. I do not doubt that what he says is true. He is not like other people. He is not a thief or a trouble-maker or an adulterer. He is definitely not like the tax collector, In fact, when the Pharisee goes on, we realize he's not just right, but actually exceeded the requirements of being righteous.

The other man in this parable is the tax collector. He also is in the temple praying, but he stands at a distance from the Pharisee, away from the center where people normally gather. His prayer is quite different. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” The tax-collector is pretty much the

opposite of the Pharisee. He is a failure at keeping the law. He doesn't know his Bible. He has pretty much nothing to boast about. To be a tax collector in Jesus' time is very different from today's context. In the first century world, a tax collector was the worst kind of a crook. He colluded with the Roman Empire to extort money from his own people. He was seen as a bad guy, despised and feared. No one looks at him as a successful person and no one would call him righteous. Far from it, most of his neighbours – off of whom he makes his living – probably despise him. And he knows this, and so he stands at the edge of the Temple – or, if he were here today, sits at the farthest back of the sanctuary. This tax collector won't even lift his eyes toward heaven but simply asks for mercy. This is the one, the tax collector, Jesus says, who returned to his home justified.

So what's the problem here?

Isn't that what we were taught? Not only in churches but in our homes as well? To be righteous, according to the Christian teaching, is to live your life in accordance with the laws – with the rules. The better you are at keeping the rules, the more righteous, the more accepted you are. Now, we don't use the word "righteous" that much anymore, but we could easily translate it as moral, good, upright, blameless, honorable, successful. 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 have no need of life-giving values and we choose to do what we wish to do with our lives.

You may not pray like the Pharisee in the parable but have you ever expressed those kinds of opinions in conversations, in meetings, when you talk to your children or the way you treat others? Have you ever kept those thoughts to yourself in silent self-righteousness? 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. Traditional interpretation of this text tells us that we don't want to take the Pharisees' side. We want to be the justified tax collector because we have come to believe that Pharisees are narrow, legalistic hypocrites.

The lectionary group last Tuesday concedes that this parable is not about a bad Pharisee and a good tax collector. That is not the point here. This parable is about moral superiority and our attitude towards others and ourselves. It is yet another parable on humility. This parable is an invitation to stop keeping score, to acknowledge that sometimes we are in the dead places of our life: the failures and disappointments; the break ups and break downs; the emptiness, sufferings, addictions; the places of our life where we no longer dream dreams, have visions, or hope.

That is what the tax collector did. The tax collector stands, on the margins, 'beating his breast.' He keeps his head bent. His words are simple. He does not embark on an eloquent litany of his sins to match the Pharisee's virtues. He hopes in God alone, not in an extravagant outpouring of remorse. The tax collector casts himself on the mercies of God. The tax collector went home justified, not because he was good or better than the Pharisee, he wasn't, but because he offered and confessed his broken life not a scorecard. For the tax collector, owning to his misgivings and accepting that he has committed wrong, has opened the door to a new life, a new world, a new self-understanding, a new relationship with God. That is another way of homecoming. We don't know what happened after he got home but we know this. A choice now lay before him, the choice to walk as a new, transformed human being.

So today – 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.

Today as we reflect on this parable, 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 go out of these doors and come home justified!

I leave you with words from the theologian poet Andrew King:

You can stand by a river, admire its freshness, yet never dip foot in the stream.

You can come to the temple with prayer high-sounding, yet be untouched by all it might mean.

You can stand in the light, blink your eyes in the dazzle, yet never feel its warmth on your skin.

You can open your purse, give a tenth of your treasure, yet never feel mercy within.

You can fast twice a week and yet still go hungry for a taste of God's life-giving grace.

You can live by the law, apply all the rules, yet miss the love that fills all time and space.

Though proudly I lived, and sternly I judged, there is something I've late come to learn:

and that is that I, too, am among those in need of the mercy that cannot be earned.

I realize, now, how wrong I was in my judging of the tax collector offering his prayer.

And now I give thanks that all are included in God's acceptance, forgiveness, and care.

Welcome home! Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group

David Lose, www.workingpreacher.org

Andrew King, *A Poetic Kind of Place* blog

Michael Marsh, interruptingthesilence.com