

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Before we get too deep into this gospel reading, I'm wondering who has heard this parable before? Well, let me first give the sermon I usually hear on this text. It goes like this... We have two people. One is a Pharisee, a Jewish leader who is exceedingly righteous and judgmental, and the other is a tax collector, a traitor of his people, who is humble and contrite. While you might think the righteous one following God's rules has the best relationship with God, it is the tax collector who is justified with God. So, the takeaway, be humble. Amen.

Now, I get that on this beautiful fall day in Chicago you're hoping for that sermon. I also understand the impulse to interpret this parable in that way. After all, the English text lends itself to that interpretation. So too, in Luke's gospel, the Pharisees are Jewish temple authorities who are called hypocrites, self-righteous, and elitist. Luke often portrays them as "bad" and wants us to shy away from the actions of the Pharisees.

Unfortunately, that language has far too often been a Biblical permission slip for people to adopt hateful antisemitic language. It's not just the Skinheads and the KKK,¹ it's early bishops of the church like Tertullian and Ambrose, it's our namesake Martin Luther,² it's even 21st century Christians. To be clear, this text is not about anti-Jewish sentiment, it's about something entirely different.

¹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hate-groups-in-the-u-s>

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-5>

Nevertheless, given these literary features, it's natural that we shy away from identifying with the Pharisee. Instead, we want to align our actions with the humble, repentant tax collector. We want the lesson for the gospel to be humility. We pretend that we aren't like that Pharisee. Sure, we probably don't sit in church and pray like the Pharisee when he said, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector" ... who was standing next to him. While we might not list those same words, perhaps it's more like I thank you God that I'm not like that person taking every government handout, or thank God that I'm not like that lazy immigrant, or thank God that I'm not like that "Karen" at the store, or thank God that I'm not that straight white cis man unaware of his privilege, or thank God I'm not like that person who doesn't live up to their commitments, (do you see where this is going?), or thank God that I'm not like that Republican or Democrat or Libertarian, or thank God that I'm not like that country bumpkin or that stuck-up yuppie, or thank God that I'm not like that person flaunting their wealth or like that cheapskate. Thank God, I'm not like him, her, or them. Thank God I am kind, I am nice, I am good, and I do the right thing. Thank God.

I think if we're honest, we've said something like this to ourselves at some point. Or if we haven't then, maybe we're like the tax collector. Remember he's likely overcharging his people taxes so that he can give the money to those occupying his people's land. He acknowledges his sin and begs for mercy, but I'm not sure that he really changed. We know he went back to his home, but he probably went back to over-charging people, colluding with the occupying rulers, and to making a decent living for his family's survival. While we might not be a tax collector, how many times have we said, I'm sorry that I was rude, that I was short-tempered, or

that I was selfish. How many times have we been sorrowful about our carbon footprint, our capitalistic consumption, or our treatment of the unknown worker who makes our clothes, our gadgets, and cultivates our food? Then, before we've even completed that thought, we're rude again, we fly on a plane again, or purchase fast fashion clothing once again. How many times do we repent for failing to love the other and then turn back around and do the same thing again?

If I'm honest, I am like the Pharisee *and* the tax collector. So, it's a little unnerving that the tax collector is the justified and the Pharisee appears not to be. And in case you have no idea what "justified" means, it's basically saying that the tax collector is made right with God and the Pharisee is not. However, in looking at it a bit closer at the Greek, the New Testament scholar and self-described Orthodox Jew, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, notes that it's not that simplistic. Remember what verse 14 said "[the tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than [the Pharisee]." Dr. Levine notes that the phrase "rather than" is a bad translation. Instead, the same Greek word can be translated "alongside." So, the verse would read like this: "[the tax collector] went down to his home justified alongside [the Pharisee]."

You see, this translation is not only far less antisemitic but it's also far more contextual. Remember, in Jesus' time, the Pharisee was doing everything he was supposed to do according to the religious text; in fact, he was *exceeding* expectations. Next to him was a tax collector who says he's sorry but then, probably doesn't change his actions.

What's draws me in most with this translation was that both are made right with God. That is, how God's grace was so disgustingly undeserved. As Rev. Dr. Matthew Skinner notes, it would be easy for us to tell God that this is the worst business model. Saying, God, you can't run an operation where those who do the work and

those who don't get the same treatment.³ What are you doing, God, that you are willy-nilly giving away forgiveness to someone who is horrible, asks for mercy, and doesn't prove their contrition? After all, if you start doing this, God, then it's going to be a slippery slope. Soon every person will be justified. And if that's the case, then, why in the heck am I here today. Why would I even try?

And that's why I think this story is shocking and offensive. Because, yes, the horrible yet repentant is graciously justified, and the one who is trying to be righteous gets the exact same justification. Doesn't that seem wrong, unjust, and inappropriate? And if we think of that for just a millisecond, then we are like the Pharisee. We begin to think that we are better than another. Our own self-righteousness and ego prevent us from seeing that we need God's grace too or we'd be out of luck.

And that's the real good news in today's reading. We are reminded that no matter how much we think we deserve it, or how much we know we don't and fail to align our actions, we are given God's love, grace, and forgiveness in equal amounts. We are loved with our imperfections. We are forgiven in our screw ups. We are set free from the rat race of trying to be perfect, because, let's be honest, that's never going to happen.

It's this gift given to us when we are so underserving that can be so compelling. Because if I, so imperfect, so underserving, and so selfish, can be given boundless grace, then the least I can do is try to share that same grace with others. The least I can do in thanksgiving for that gift is to share the gifts I've been given.

So, in the end, perhaps my prayer is one of thanksgiving. My prayer looks a bit different than that of the Pharisee because I thank God that I'm just like that Pharisee and that I'm just like that tax collector. I pray this because of who God is

³ Working Preacher podcast for Sunday, October 23, 2022

and what God does, because I thank God that our God is so recklessly gracious toward me. Amen.