

TWO SPIRITUALITIES

Luke 18: 9-14; Romans 7: 14-25

Steve and Jack were brothers. But they couldn't be more different as persons. Steve was a go getter. He always did things right. He was great at sports. He was smart in school. He studied business in university and with his winning personality found work in the corporate world rising to the top with a hefty six-figure salary. Steve was also well put together with fine features. He married his high school sweetheart who was the head cheerleader of their school football team. He was the quarterback, of course. Steve just had it all. He knew that. But he also believed that everything you got in life you earned. Sure his parents raised him well and provided support all the way. But Steve worked hard for everything he earned and he deserved every recognition he received.

His brother Jack, on the other hand, was a different story. Life just didn't go right for Jack. Early in school he got involved with the wrong crowd. Smoking and drinking led to harder stuff and drug use too. Even as he got through school, getting his girlfriend pregnant meant he had to quit any further study and get a job. Odd jobs here and there paid the bills for a while, but Jack couldn't control his addictions. Drinking, drugs and gambling took over his life. His girlfriend eventually left with their child. Jack lost his job because he showed up late, if at all, way too many times. It wasn't until he hit rock bottom, all alone, that Jack sought some help. An AA group was a lifesaver. With nothing left but his life, Jack started to climb out of the pit. With the support of his sponsor and some new friends, he started to rebuild his life. With a job one of his friends helped him get, Jack got himself a small apartment. He volunteered at the local foodbank when he wasn't at work.

Jack hadn't seen his brother or parents in years. But one day he got a call. It was Steve. He was abrupt and to the point. Jack had not only messed up his own life. He had broken his parents' hearts too. His mother had died some years ago. But now, their dad had had a massive heart attack and would probably not live long. Steve would not bother to have called Jack, but their father really wanted to see him. Would he come? Steve would allow it if Jack promised to behave himself.

Well, Jack knew he had to go and see his father. But it would be the hardest thing he'd had to do for a long time. He knew he was a massive disappointment and a failure. He

had his brother to remind him of that in case he ever forgot. What could he say to his father that would offer any comfort?

Once he got to the hospital, Steve was there. He wanted to make sure Jack wasn't drunk or high. Jack told his brother he had stopped doing all that. Steve found that hard to believe, given that Jack had tried to do that before and failed every time. Anyhow, he left Jack alone to go in and see their dad. When Jack saw his father, the tears just started flowing. His dad looked so old and frail. His dad opened his eyes. They were warm eyes. He tried to raise his hand to meet Jack's. Jack continued to weep. He hugged his dad. He saw his dad was weeping too. Jack apologized. He had made a mess of his life and had hurt his parents deeply. Now that he had lost everything, he was trying to find himself. With a lot of caring support and friendship, he was beginning to rebuild his life... But it was too late for his mother. Would his father ever forgive him?...

Before I continue with this story, I'd like to bring in our scripture readings. Steve and Jack are not just different human beings. They also represent different spiritualities. Steve believes goodness is up to you to achieve. And if you don't achieve it, you have no one to blame but yourself. Sure everyone doesn't start off with the same good fortune. Some have better parents than others and better supports. But ultimately, it's up to you to make your life as you make it. Goodness is reachable and badness is resistible. This also means that those who mess up have no one to blame at the end of the day but themselves. You are what you make yourself and failure is on you. Let's call this a merit-based spirituality.

Jack, on the other hand, knows intimately what it's like to fail and fall. Sure he can blame all kinds of people for the mess he's fallen into, but he carries enough guilt and shame to sabotage himself plenty. People can judge him but he judges himself too just fine. He'd like to be good and some days it feels like he can get there. But other days he just can't get it together. Sometimes he can connect his moral failure to things that have happened in his life and negative experiences. But whatever the reasons he is as he is, he's the one who has to wear it. The pain and disappointment he causes others lives in him too. That just adds to his feeling like a failure.

OK, but there's something else. Jack is slowly coming out of the hole he's been in. Why? How? Does he discover something his brother Steve doesn't have? Does the fact that Jack has hit rock bottom open him up to another kind of goodness than what his brother Steve has? Is there another kind of spirituality than the merit-based one that is,

perhaps, a lot more genuine and real? Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of an answer. And let's begin with our gospel reading.

Jesus lives in a world where your standing in life is very much based on how good or bad you are. There are strict behaviours and requirements that define what side you're on, on the good-bad scale. At the top of the scale of goodness are religious officials called Pharisees. Pharisees take their religion seriously. They see themselves as models of what goodness should look like. They practice their religion openly so people can see it. They pray often, give money, worship regularly and observe all the religious laws commanded in the scriptures. They also believe being a good person and faithful to God is up to you. You have no one to blame but yourself for messing up and failing to keep religious laws faithfully. And so, Pharisees also tend to be judgemental. Or, as Jesus describes the one in the parable he tells: Pharisees see themselves as righteous and regard others with "contempt."

On the other end of the spectrum is the tax-collector. Tax-collectors are part of a system that preys on people in order to extract heavy taxes from them. These taxes go to Rome and the money is used to keep Jews dominated. For doing the dirty work of Rome, tax-collectors also take a cut for themselves. They make money on the oppression of their own people. Pretty disgraceful. No wonder they were hated and no wonder Pharisees looked on tax collectors with contempt.

But where does compassion fit into spirituality? Where does humility fit in? Where does gratitude for the gift of love fit in? If everything you do is earned or deserved there is no room for gift. If everything you do is your doing then why feel humble rather than proud? If you are loved because you have made yourself worthy of being loved why not feel self-satisfied rather than grateful?

And here's the final problem. People who measure goodness purely on the merit basis of what you do or fail to do tend to be judgemental and hard-hearted, lacking in mercy and compassion. Why? Because they don't know failure. Any mistake is either justified or it has to be someone else's fault. There is no room for failure because anyone who fails deserves contempt. But if there's no human being who doesn't fail, doesn't this also encourage people to be false and hypocritical for believing themselves to be good when there are times they are not so good? And even though people may do many good things, if love and compassion is not in their hearts, how good is the good in the end?

Now, even though there are plenty of Christians who live by a merit-based spirituality and plenty of people who have felt judged in church for not living to some standard

which no one can ever meet perfectly, this is not the spirituality that Jesus and the apostle Paul teach.

Jesus goes out of his way to condemn the Pharisees. Why? Because even though they do everything right according to religious commandments, they fail the most important commandment of all: love. And love is most powerful when you are able to put yourself in the shoes of those who are morally failed by society's standards. Compassion and a spirit of forgiveness are the highest standards for measuring the quality of your spirituality. Forgiveness doesn't mean we let people off the hook who are involved in inflicting injustice. No. But forgiveness understands that unless a heart is able to heal, a person will not seek to atone for their participation in injustice from their hearts. Someone has to reach out and someone has to make the first move. Forgiveness opens a door. Forgiveness recognizes that no one is perfect. Forgiveness realizes that we all need support and a chance to start again or a chance to try to make things right.

The tax collector in Jesus story is not "justified" because of what he has done to people as a tax collector. No. He is justified because he has opened his heart in remorse and regret. He is met with forgiving compassion from a God who is infinite love. Out of such forgiving, compassionate love, there is a chance he may heal and reach out to make things right for all he has done. The Pharisee, on the other hand, is so full of himself and his own righteousness, his energy towards others is contemptuous and judgemental. He has nothing to offer society but condemnation. He has not discovered God's heart even as he claims to be God's beloved servant.

And what about the apostle Paul? Paul comes up with a word to put forth a spirituality that is truly Jesus-centered. If the pharisaic spirituality is a merit-based spirituality, Paul's spirituality is a Grace-centered spirituality. Grace means that you are loved not because you are deserving. No. You are loved despite the fact that you fail and fall, even the best of you. We are vulnerable as human beings. Put us in the wrong place, with the wrong people, at the wrong time and with inadequate supports, trauma and poor nurturing from parents and teachers... and what will happen? We are vulnerable. Without the grace of God, without enough love extended to us, without an open hand rather than a closed fist, where would any of us be?

In our scripture reading, Paul uses lots of religious language that would be familiar to Jewish-Christian people in his day. He talks of the law which is religious law. He makes a distinction between the spiritual and the flesh. Flesh, here is not about the body. Flesh here is about those actions, arising from motivations deep within us, that can take over and lead us to speak and act in ways that are wrong and hurtful to others

and to ourselves. Paul is hard on himself, recognizing that as much as he wants to be a 'good' person, he fails and falls all too often. But his whole point is not to tear himself down. His whole point is that the experience of God and Christ for him is the experience of humble gratitude and joy because he knows he is loved beyond anything he can do for good or ill. It is this gift love, this grace, which transforms him and opens his heart to love as he is loved.

Grace is reciprocal. Until you experience love as an undeserved gift and allow such love to flow through you, you cannot love others and this earth fully and completely. And that's the whole goal of spirituality – to fill our hearts with love to overflowing. Nothing greater than such love can truly heal and bless our world beginning with us. This is what Jesus is teaching and this is what inspires Paul.

The tax collector feels like a wretch. Paul sometimes feels like a wretch, as he says. Jack, in our story feels like a wretch. Yes, they've done some bad stuff. Pharisees like Steve haven't apparently made any big mistakes. But where is the love in their hearts? Jack had nothing but tears for his father. And yet they were able to embrace each other in a way Steve could never know. Even as Jack's father died soon after their visit, Jack, like the tax collector, left justified in his heart even as Steve continued to carry contempt in his heart.

What about you and me? Where is your heart in your spirituality before God and in relationship to the life around you? People will disappoint us and frustrate us too. We will disappoint ourselves. Life will not always work out as we want it to. Unless we ground ourselves in the infinite gift-love of God – divine grace, we will be ill-equipped to live our lives with acceptance and compassion...

Let us pray: Fill us, O God, fill our hearts with your love... Heal any pain, hurt or anger in us. Liberate us from contempt. Ground us in your Grace-love. Make us liberal in our sharing and caring with others and this earth... Amen.