

Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22

Luke 18:9-14

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

“Our soul has a desire and a longing for God;
let heart and flesh rejoice.” AMEN!

Jesus’ parable today was about a Pharisee
and a tax collector.

And it reminds me of a man that used to go
to the same church I did.

Brad (we’ll name him) sang in the choir.

He was an IT professional and helped
the congregation by developing a website.

Brad was often a reader and he participated
as a communion assistant.

Brad consistently came to church with
his wife and they’d bring their son.

One day, Brad found out he had prostate cancer
and went in for surgery.

The pastor visited him before the surgery and
saw him a couple times in the hospital
before he went home.

Prayers were answered and the surgery

was a success and Brad went back to life.

Their son graduated from high school and
went to trade school following his calling.

Suddenly, Brad stopped coming to choir
and then he made an appointment
with the pastor for a meeting.

During the meeting he confessed that
he was coming to a crisis of faith.

Well, he didn't use those exact words, but
he said that he felt like he's an agnostic and
was battling feelings of guilt because
here he was, not sure if there was a God,

yet still singing in the choir and
participating in the worship like
he was a strong, faithful believer.

Nothing the pastor said could relieve Brad of
the self-inflicted feelings of hypocrisy.

It was powerful.

He walked away from church and
the church family that he'd been a part of
for many years.

Brad's wife continued to worship for
a few months by herself but soon
they both left the congregation altogether. (Pause)

There were times when I'd look at the place
where they used to sit and I'd think about them.

Pray for them.

Imagine what they were doing away from
the community of believers that had been
a part of their lives for so long.

The prayer team prayed for them.

People called, but nothing
brought them back.

Was it shame?

Maybe there was guilt or
an anger at God?

What was it that suddenly made Brad
feel unworthy or unable to enter God's house
and pray with all of "us"
respectable people? :-)

Now, I know this is not a perfect example of
the parable Jesus told us this morning.

And I know, the circumstances that prompted Brad,
and then his family, to disconnect from the church
were not the same ones that compelled

the tax collector to stand far off in the temple,
beat himself up, and asking for God's mercy.

And the attitude that the church had was
not the same self-righteousness we find
in the Pharisee.

People prayed, called, and the pastor tried
to offer a path to return.

Some even admitted their own struggles with faith
and talked of this being quite normal.

But, nothing worked.

And this is a feeling that we come away
with in the parable, too.

Neither the tax collector nor the Pharisee works...

I mean, who are we supposed to copy?

How often do we think (and pray) like the Pharisee?

How often do we behave like the tax collector? (Pause)

This ambiguity in the parable is intriguing, to me.

It's a perfect Jesus teaching moment
that is meant to disrupt us.

Just like the way I was disrupted
by the sudden absence of Brad and his family.

And that in their absence, and the empty place
where they once sat,

I was moved by the suffering and it made me
think of all the people that remain
disconnected from places and
communities of worship.

How there is this struggle of
people on the margins.

People who feel unworthy, imperfect, unloved,
and find the only recourse is to walk this life alone;
like the tax collector, many stand far off
and beat themselves up.

Feeling like they don't deserve

the mercy God promises.

Promises to pour out mercy on humanity.

Of course, these feelings occur in us,
who are here today, and
to those who are worshipping at home.

The knowledge that God will be merciful.

But still, we have all been too afraid to pray;
too ashamed to look up to heaven;
too proud to admit we don't have all
the answers.

And thus have thanked God we were
not like this person or that person.

We may have prayed that way and we may not
have done half of the sins that
the tax collector committed.

Or maybe we have...

This tax collector in the story would
have been the vile character of the parable,
to the 1st century listener.

Tax collectors in Jesus' day were Jewish men

that collected taxes on behalf of
the Roman Empire.

They were the “sell-outs” to the foreign occupiers,
scum... and it was well known that
they’d take bribes and over charge
to pocket the extra money
for themselves.

It’s more than a little funny, how our ears ring
when we hear the name Pharisee.

To us, these are the vile “sell-outs.” Right?

They are the ones that distort God’s law and
always oppose Jesus.

We leap to the conclusion that they’re the bad guys.

Then in this moment of picking and choosing,
we might accept the humor, Jesus provided,
in the parable.

Do you sense the irony?

It is there... when we allow
Jesus’ voice speak it.

The listeners to Jesus’ parable instantly

hated the tax collector and
loved the Pharisee.

They expected him to be the one to copy.

So holy, and righteous he was that
he fasted twice a week and gave
a tenth of all his income.

But our ears hear the opposite.

We hate the Pharisee and love the tax-collector.

Jesus flipped them and flips us with God's disruption.

Jesus attacks our prejudices and draws us
to think about the ones we cheer for and
notice the ones to which we hiss at
and "boo!"

Jesus' audience must of stood baffled.

"How could the Pharisee turn out to be bad
and (even worse) how could a tax collector
turn out to be good?"

We also stand baffled when Jesus
switches hats on us.

And we are disrupted.

Changed, and transformed by moments when
we ask God to make us holy and disrupted us
when in life we didn't expect God to listen.

Moments like that of the Pharisee
when we prayed, giving thanks that
we weren't like that politician or
that religious person.

Then in those moments, like the tax collector,
when we don't know how to
make our past mistakes right.

In total need of mercy... (Pause)

Today, Jesus tells us that it is precisely,
in these moments,
that God finds us.

In an outrageous parable of God's mercy.

Mercy that disrupts us. (Pause)

I don't know whatever happened to Brad.
I like to hope that he found a way to connect
with a church community and to accept
that struggling with faith meant he's

taking his faith walk seriously.

I like to think that he feels right with God.

And is reminded by God's mercy,
disrupted by God's grace.

After all, the two extremes, the Pharisee and
the tax collector, are both disconnected.

Jesus said, the Pharisee was standing by himself
and tax collector was standing far-off...
and Jesus noticed it all.

AMEN!