

All The Ways God's Mercy Works: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18: 9-14

Amy Jill-Levine did it again, reimagining a familiar parable. I've preached this parable more than a few times, but here's a sermon based on my new hearing of it. I call it: All the Ways God's Mercy Works.

The parable's two characters are easy to caricature, to turn into cartoon characters, especially the Pharisee. Levine complexifies the parable in ways that help us listen in more carefully. Fred Craddock, great preacher and teacher of preachers, says of sermons: "Sometimes the preacher's role is to make the strange familiar; others times to make the familiar strange." The latter may be our need today.

I

So let's begin with the way Luke frames the parable. In his one sentence introduction he writes:

"He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others."

We can grow proud and complacent in our spiritual lives, like the deacon in a John Updike short story who had become "too much at home" in church. Blessed,

Jesus said, are those destitute in spirit, not those full of themselves, spiritually speaking. Flannery O'Connor says of Southern religion:

“The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic.”¹

Blessed are those, Jesus said, who know their need of God, the kingdom is near for their turning.

But there's this other tiny little problem with these types, as Luke frames it: their righteousness leads them to “despise others.” That's unfortunate. They look down their noses at others. They see themselves as God's chosen doorkeepers of the church. But Jesus is the only doorkeeper, and he is welcoming than we can imagine. They see themselves called to keep their hand on the spigot of grace, controlling its flow, but if grace is not for all, it is not grace!

II

We are being set up from the story's beginning to despise the Pharisee and love the tax collector. It happens more than a few times in the gospel, the Pharisees the bad guys, the tax collectors eager to repent and the disciples as the keystone cops running around always missing the point. But isn't it just like us to become a Pharisee about the Pharisee in the parable and say, “I thank you God, that I am not like that Pharisee over there!” What a piece of work we are!

And then comes the saying of Jesus that Luke attached at the end of the parable, a saying used elsewhere in Luke and other gospels:

“For all who exalt themselves himself will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Now this was a key teaching of Jesus that applied to every arena in life, spiritual, moral, economic and political— just listen to Mary’s song at Jesus’ conception: “My soul magnifies the Lord. He has shown strength with his arm...scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts...brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up those of low degree...filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” This song emphasized what Luke loved about Jesus. And we as well — at least some days.

Jesus’ ministry was all about lifting up the fallen and shaking the ladder underneath the religious social climbers. He made outsiders insiders and challenged the presumption of the insiders.

Luke had his finger on some key dimensions of Jesus’ teaching, but is this is all the meaning of the parable Jesus gives us? So let’s hear and ponder it again. George Buttrick says of the two characters: “...they both live on every busy street. One of them may bear our name.”

First, let's take a closer look at the Pharisee. Pharisees are often depicted in a negative light in the gospels, particularly for their overbearing legalism, not an exclusively Jewish problem but a human and everywhere spiritual problem.

In Jesus' day the Pharisees felt that obedience to the Torah had grown lax, and they wanted to restore strict Torah observance. But they also kept Judaism alive in the coming years and helped it become what is today.

We often overlook that Pharisees were also pictured in a good light in the gospels. Jesus dined with them *too!* Sometimes they asked good questions—earnest questions, not hostile ones — to probe Jesus' teaching at points, and one time some came to him warning him about Herod's desire to kill him. Jesus received a leader of the Pharisees named Nicodemus who came to him in the hiddenness of night and led him to the truth Nicodemus was seeking.

So let's try to give the Pharisee in this parable a little slack. He was in the Temple praying, and we need not think his prayers were insincere, or for show. He prays to God. Some interpret the words, "prayed with himself" to say that the prayers were only a vain soliloquy. But not too fast. He begins his prayer: "I thank you God."

We recoil at his first words: "I thank you God that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like that tax-collector." We don't like him much here, for good reason. Fred Craddock once preached a sermon on this

text entitled, “Looking Around During the Prayer.” We do this sometimes in church, looking around at people and getting, shall we say, all “judgy” about them.

I remember a short story, I think by Flannery O’ Connor. She liked to exaggerate both the good and bad in southern religion so to get our attention. The whole short story, as I remember it, was made from the silent thoughts of a woman in the choir as she surveyed the congregation for those she ridiculed and judged. We can do that whether we sit in the choir or on the back row or somewhere in the middle!

But maybe this Pharisee’s sense of spiritual and moral superiority was not wholly judgmental. Maybe it was like a prayer of thanksgiving we know: “There but for the grace of God go I!” Have you ever in your prayers said something like, “Without my church, my family, my long conversation with Jesus, without God and some dumb luck, I could have been in real trouble”? There may have been some humility in his prayer of thanksgiving. He may have been grateful to God for having included him in the covenant that helped keep him on the straight and narrow, even with his bad attitude some days toward sinners.

Now the Pharisee lists the ways he has kept covenant faithfulness:

“I fast twice a week [far more than the Torah commanded]. I give tenth of all my income [bless him].”

He went far beyond what was expected. This is the kind of person who keeps churches going: consistent in prayer, supporting the budget, serving on boards and committees, always at church. I'm not going to pick on him!

If there was a problem it was perhaps his all-too-common belief that because he was faithful, God owed him something. A transactional relationship with God. This guy is a mixed bag, we mixed-bags might say.

IV

Now to the tax collector. We know all about him: a traitor to the nation, a collaborator with Rome, and most times a cheat who has gotten wealthy by squeezing as much money as he could out of people, a rogue IRS agent. Despised is the word.

But now he has come into the temple to pray. He had first made himself ritually clean in order to enter the temple. Some real change was already at work. The parable tells us that he stands "far off" from the others. He knows if he moves closer he will get angry stares and condemning looks.

I've known people who have come to church a few minutes late and crept to the back row so as not to be seen. They are afraid of what people may be thinking about them, but they are there because they are hungry for God, for love, for grace. They may week by week start to move closer down the rows toward the front, and risk being known if the conditions of grace are evident.

Can a tax collector be saved, a crook, a cheat, or someone who has fallen into a terrible series of bad decisions which have harmed others and self be saved? Who is beyond the mercy of God? No nominations, please!

The tax collector now prays. He would not even look up to heaven, his head lowered. He's not looking around. He beats his breast. Have you ever been so disappointed in yourself you beat on your breast, or something like that? And now he offers his prayer, one sentence, much shorter than the Pharisees' prayer: "God be merciful to me a sinner!" Do you come to church sometimes hoping for mercy?

There's the description of the two at prayer, the Pharisee and the tax collector. Now the punch line by Jesus: "I tell you; this man went down to his house justified rather than the other." We are ready for this reversal of things. It happens a lot in the gospels. It has been good news to us and to others, at least when we've identified with the tax collector.

But Amy-Jill throws a monkey wrench into my accustomed hearing of this parable. And it begins with her translation of one small word in the last sentence of Jesus' words. Here is her translation:

"To you I say, this one going down to his house is justified **ALONGSIDE** that one".

“Alongside”, not “rather than.” Is this translation which changes the whole ending possible?

Perhaps, yes. And it opens up more mercy for us all, both the Pharisee trying to be righteous and the tax collector seeking to change his life. It may be Jesus’ message to us here today.

Perhaps, this day, at this hearing the parable, God wants us to love the Pharisee in us, the part of us trying every day to be good and do good, even if we trip ourselves up by our attitude toward others some days. You know, our attitudes toward the ones we think are not doing their fair share and carrying their own weight. The “others” who seem to leave all the work to us. And who keep messing up their lives, leaving us to clean up after them. You know, the ones we think of as irresponsible and careless. “Don’t they want to get better?”

Have you ever been wrong about someone else? Aren’t you glad God doesn’t feel the same way about them? God cares for the righteous, yes, sometimes self-righteous, and for the unrighteous in God’s impartial goodness to us all.

God also wants us to forgive the mistakes we have made and to put away those old clothes of regret and remorse that hang in our closets and in our minds. As a character in a novel says, “Every saint has a ‘past’, and every sinner has a future.”

We all come to God with nothing in our hands, opening them to God's grace and to God's mercy, catching grace like a man holding his hands like a cup under a waterfall. (Thank you, Annie Dillard.)

Both the tax collector and the Pharisee, both trying hard, both US some days, go home under the Mercy.

1 Flannery O' Connor, *The Habit Of Being* (N.Y.: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), 350.