

October Sermon Series: Learn from the Master October 23, 2016

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector Luke 18: 9-14

Worship Leader 1: To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed...

Choir: God, I thank you that I am not like other people -robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector! I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get!

Worship Leader 2: But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said...

Choir: God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Worship Leader 1: Jesus said: I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. This is the Word of the Lord!

Congregation: Thank You God!

[Sing "Doo doo doo doo" from "Don't Worry Be Happy" as I walk up the aisle.] Do you know this song? It's "Don't Worry, Be Happy." It's a fun song to sing; not that it fits with today's gospel lesson. It doesn't fit anywhere with the gospel, really, because Jesus never talked about happiness. Jesus cared about love, and mercy, and justice, and His stories challenged the cultural theology of His day (like He challenges our cultural theology that what God wants most is for us to be happy.) What God wants most is for us to grow up: to grow deeper roots of love and wider branches of service; to grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ. It's hard sometimes to preach Jesus. It might be easier if He'd sung like Bobby McFerrin, "Hey! Don't worry; be happy."

Jesus didn't sing that we know of... but He told stories to the crowds who came to hear Him. Some women and men in the crowds were His disciples, and friends, and some were religious leaders who were suspicious and hostile towards Jesus.

Jesus' parables didn't sit well with everyone. A parable is like tapenade, which is a delicious spread of chopped olives, capers, anchovies, and garlic. Tapenade is delicious on a cracker unless you bite into a piece of olive pit. Then you have to spit that into your hand and make sure it's a pit (and not a tooth.) When we listen deeply to a parable we find something to chew on... but it's also likely that we find something we want to spit out. Jesus' words could be hard to swallow... sometimes indigestible to the different and diverse people who listened to Him... people who saw themselves as being important to God and people who were afraid to come before God. A parable can't be taken at face value, or we risk not hearing the hard truths Jesus told about God, and about ourselves, even if the hard truth is like biting an olive pit.

There's a Pharisee in Jesus' story, who went to the temple to pray. It's too easy to see the Pharisee as one-dimensional; a pompous, self-righteous, hypocrite. But Pharisees were men of faith who believed that the Torah (Hebrew Scriptures) belonged to every man. There's an ancient prayer Jews recite every day that recognizes their many blessings. The prayer of a Jewish man is: "Blessed are You HaShem (which is a way of referring to God, because out of reverence, Jews don't say the name of God.) Blessed are You, Hashem, King of the universe, Who has not created me as a Gentile; Who has not created me as a slave; Who has not created me as a woman." Taken at face value the prayer seems arrogant, racist, and sexist. But it's a prayer of gratitude, a conversation between a man, who recognizes his place in the world, and God, the giver of all life and all gifts. The prayer of the Pharisee seems to have started out as the traditional prayer of thanksgiving and blessing... of reminding himself, and God, about their relationship... "Blessed are You, King of the universe..." but instead the Pharisee

congratulated himself on how good he was, as if the prayer was, “Blessed am I, King of the universe.” The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank You (and it’s all downhill from there.) I thank You that I am not like other people: thieves, crooks, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” You’ll notice that there’s no mention in the prayer of God’s goodness, only of the Pharisee’s goodness, and his gratitude is self-focused, not God-focused. The Pharisee does all the right things... but his heart is strangely in the wrong place.

There’s a tax collector in Jesus’ story, who also went to the temple to pray. It’s too easy to see him as a humble and contrite sinner, wayward, unassuming. But tax collectors were rightly despised. They collaborated with the hated Roman government; many were unscrupulous and dishonest, extorting money from their fellow Jews, and pocketing what wasn’t owed in taxes.

The tax collector also went to the temple to pray, but he couldn’t raise his eyes to heaven. Instead he beat his breast as a sign of remorse and repentance. His prayer was simple: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” His prayer like the Pharisee’s, reminded God and himself, of who he was. The Pharisee was more than righteous... he’d crossed into self-righteousness, but didn’t realize that he wasn’t “right” with God. The tax collector realized that his lack of “rightness” was a barrier between himself and God; a barrier between himself and others. He’d done none of the good and righteous things the Pharisee had done... and yet the tax collector’s heart was strangely in the right place.

This is a pretty happy parable after all. It doesn’t seem like there’s an olive pit in the tapenade. But I think there is. I think the Pharisees, the religious, church-going,

moral, followers of the Mosaic Law (that includes the Ten Commandments) would have been outraged and offended (again) by this olive pit. The real sin of the Pharisee was the sin of many good and righteous and church-going people... who reject and exclude fellow children-of-God. It wasn't that the Pharisee was so full of himself; that's almost laughable; Jesus makes him a kind of comic character. But the Pharisee's refusal, or his inability, to see someone different as also belonging to God, and being valued by God, was his sin. Jesus said, "I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went home right with God (rather than the Pharisee.)"

Following Jesus isn't easy... He makes it hard because He asks us to have enlarged hearts that love and include all people... all kinds of people like a tax collector (if you're a Pharisee) or a Pharisee (if you're a tax collector.) It doesn't seem fair (I'm just saying, Lord) that it doesn't seem fair that You expect Your followers to have larger than average hearts, when having a smaller heart has been proven to be safer and more in keeping with the culture we live in... and with the political and cultural and even religious understanding that we love those who love us (and believe like us) and we look down on... we fear... we despise ... everyone else. I'm just saying, Lord, why do we need bigger hearts?

To call someone a Pharisee is an insult. It means a person outwardly does all the right things before God, but inwardly is none of those right things. Pharisees seem to have often been the unfortunate example Jesus used to teach about being right with God, and having a heart right with God. Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites and "whitewashed tombs" for following the letter of the Law, rather than the heart of the Law. The letter of the Law is the following the rules, and measuring ourselves and other

people against the rules. The heart of the Law (and this is the olive pit... difficult to swallow, indigestible for those of us who want to do right more than we want to be right with God.) The heart of the Law is seeing other people as equally beloved children of God.

On the front of the bulletin is a picture of heart. It looks like it's been beat up. I think this is a heart that's had to break open, and enlarge, to make room for God to make God's home in it. This is a picture of a transformed heart... cracked, patched and bandaged, imperfect, and humble. This is a heart that's been enlarged for more love, more joy, more peace, more compassion. But why do we need enlarged hearts... hearts big enough to welcome God and include others? Well, for two reasons. The first is because Jesus said this is the most important thing that we do, ever, that it matters more than anything. "Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. And love others as well as you love yourself." And the second reason is because God's desire is to change the world (starting with you, and you, and me) - so that God's Kingdom is not just in our hearts but on earth everywhere, the way it is in heaven.

This month I've been preaching about following the Master, Jesus. We follow and learn from Jesus by practicing thankfulness; by serving others; by praying persistently and not losing heart; by seeing ourselves and all others as beloved children of God; and by remembering that who we are is God's gift to us.

We have a verse to say this month, to take to heart. Jesus said this (realizing that it isn't easy and might not contribute to our happiness) to follow Him. Instead following Jesus gives us bigger hearts, more love, more peace, and more compassion. Let's read

October's verse for the soul on the bottom of page three, starting with the words, "Jesus said." "Jesus said: Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."