

Sermon: October 23, 2016 – Luke 18: 9-14

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Few things can spoil a page-turning mystery novel or suspenseful movie, more easily than someone letting you in on the plot twist ahead of time and ruining the element of surprise. At times, the stories of the Bible suffer from this same malaise: some stories are so familiar to us that any shock value for the original audience has been completely lost.

Today's story about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, or the Pharisee and the "Publican" in King James English, is the kind of story where we would be well served by forgetting everything we know about it in order to let it surprise us the way it surprised the people trooping around with Jesus. In fact, let's go one step further: in addition to forgetting what we know, let's fill our minds with the things we would have known if we had lived back then, with thanks to some groundwork by Biblical commentators Brian Stoffregen and Linda Pepe.

So first of all, the Publican, or Tax Collector. What would we know about him?

It appears that Jewish tax collectors were paid very little by the state, yet most of them lived in luxury. How could this be? Well, the same way that a thug might control his neighbourhood in our day, by straight-out intimidation: pay me double the official tax, or the life of your family will be in danger. Or, perhaps, the extra pay came by acting as a snitch, watching for minor little infractions and threatening to alert the Roman overlords unless you pay him to keep quiet.

A tax collector, then, was a pretty proud guy, not admirable but self-assured and feared. Rather than settling for the pittance he was paid by legitimate means, he found ways to be the big boss in the neighbourhood, a self-made man.

Then there's the other character, the Pharisee.

Mothers wanted their sons to grow up to be Pharisees, because their cause was so noble. Pharisees were terribly devout, praying several times a day, learning the depths of God's word as revealed in scripture, ensuring that the religious requirements of the Torah were carried out on behalf of their people.

For a Pharisee, all life was lived, as it were, in the shadow of God's over-arching glory. They saw themselves as humble servants of the Most High and Merciful God, their lives devoted to keeping the finest points of the covenant that God had made with them.

In the hearts and minds of Jesus' first audience, they knew these two characters. There was that despicable tax collector, who was so proud of his ill-gotten gain; and then there was that admirable Pharisee, whose whole life had been given over to the humble service of his Lord.

In the presence of that knowledge, hear the story of the Pharisee and the Publican, as if for the first time, as presented by the Bible translation called, "The Voice":

Jesus said to them, "Imagine two men walking up a road, going to the temple to pray. One of them is a Pharisee and the other is a despised tax collector. Once inside the temple, the Pharisee stands up and prays this prayer in honor of himself: 'God, how I thank You that I am not on the same level as other people—crooks, cheaters, the sexually immoral—like this tax collector over here. Just look at me! I fast not once but twice a week, and I faithfully pay my tithes on every penny of income.' Over in the corner, the tax collector begins to pray, but he won't even lift his eyes to heaven. He pounds on his chest in sorrow and says, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' (Luke 18: 10-13, *The Voice*)

In giving a window into the prayer life of these two people, Jesus took the nameplates "Proud" and "Humble," which the audience would all understand in the same way, and reversed them. According to the court of public opinion, tax collectors were proud and Pharisees were humble but for this sage who could see into people's hearts, it was the Pharisee who was filled with pride, and the tax collector who knew how much he needed the forgiveness of God.

And Jesus said, “all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14) The first shall be last – the last shall be first. (Matthew 20:16) Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. (Luke 6: 20) Jesus repeatedly challenges his crowd to re-think most of what they know, because the casual prejudices that shape our days will always lead us away from the truth of the matter. People we despise or exclude are always more complex than we would imagine, and those we put on a pedestal as heroes and role models will always have negative characteristics or dirty little secrets we’d rather not know about. The human tendency to see things as clear-cut, black-and-white, will always lead us to inaccurate conclusions about others, and even about ourselves.

So what do we do with this newly-reversed information? According to Luke, we might get the impression that once we have peeled the labels off their original locations and switched them, the task is complete: Pharisees aren’t humble, they’re proud; Tax collectors aren’t proud, they’re humble. Christians have known this for nearly 2000 years now, what else is there to know?

At the Banff Men’s Conference last weekend our theme speaker, the Very Rev. Gary Paterson, reminded us that in the gospels Jesus asks somewhere between 130 and 300 questions, depending on how you count the duplicates between Matthew, Mark and Luke, whereas there are only a handful of places where Jesus gives a straight answer to a question. So perhaps this scripture is about more than just getting the “good guy” sticker affixed to the Publican and “bad guy” sticker affixed to the Pharisee. If Jesus is just an “answer man” then getting those stickers in the right place might be enough, but if we see Jesus as the one who is constantly questioning our pre-conceptions and pushing us to see the fullness of our neighbour’s humanity and, indeed our own complexity, we need to be more patient and see what emerges.

One of life’s greatest and most difficult tasks is to accept that to be fully human is to have strengths and weaknesses, admirable qualities and embarrassing qualities. That’s true for me, it’s true for you, it’s true for my self-perception and for my engagement of the world around me. It’s true for the way we relate to our parents and our children, the way we relate to our past and our future...and the sooner we figure this out, the more we will be able to love ourselves and our neighbour and our kinfolk with the clarity of affection that God holds for each of us.

Quaker theologian and educator Parker Palmer shares a poem written by a Persian mystic named Rumi back in the 13th century. The poem, translated into English, goes like this:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent

as a guide from beyond.

Reflecting on this poem, Parker Palmer says this:

“Rumi insists that we should not only welcome these troublesome guests but ‘be grateful for whoever comes.’ Even if they ‘violently sweep your house / empty of its furniture,’ he says, they may be ‘clearing you out/for some new delight.’

“For a long time, I thought Rumi meant, ‘These hard feelings will pass, and happier ones will take their place.’ Then it dawned on me that even when the vandals are trashing my guest house, their very presence is a sign that I’m human: as Rumi says, ‘This being human is a guest house.’

“That’s a fact that unites me with everyone who acknowledges and accepts their human condition. For me, the true delight is in knowing that we have company on this endless and sometimes perilous journey toward becoming more fully human.”

Jesus portrayed the Pharisee and the Tax Collector at temple together, and it could be that all he had in mind was re-shaping our perception of others: to understand that even a publican could be humble, and to warn the devout that their pride could undermine their relationship with both God and neighbour. That, in itself is a tremendously important message, in a world increasingly dominated by arrogant pride of self and harsh judgment of the shortcomings of other people and other peoples. And it’s not just Pharisees of the world who judge the publicans; it’s just as common for the under-class to judge those who are in positions of power.

But I also wonder if maybe, just maybe, the temple Jesus is referring to is our lives. For I recognize that within me is the proud one and the humble one, and at times it feels like those two are duking it out. There are times when things are free and easy, and humble generosity comes easy; and there are times when the pressure is on and the resources are meagre and my ego feels a bit threatened, and some mean, prideful, ridiculous things get said or done. It all goes into what Rumi called “welcoming and entertaining the unexpected visitors”: inviting God’s own grace and patience to our best and our worst, and trusting that each moment of each day gives us a new opportunity to live into the fullness of God’s amazing love. Each of us will have moments we can be rightly proud of and moments when we really, really hope that nobody saw what just happened, and as we come to be at peace with that conflict within ourselves, our capacity to reach out to those around is with love will grow exponentially.

One of the huge gains of my dozen years out of Ministry, working in an extremely busy school office, was the opportunity to work with a couple of hundred different co-workers and a few thousand students and parents. When you’re encountering that many different people, it doesn’t take long to realize the vast range of personalities out there, and the variety of quirky joys and challenges of being human: there were people who were warm and gracious right from the beginning; there were insistent, irritating folks who would drive us batty; there were individuals who were pretty secure in who they were, who could celebrate their positive contributions and laugh about their foibles; and there were tortured souls who seemed to be in a constant state of unhappiness, unable to offer spaciousness to themselves or to those of us who had to deal with them. We dealt with every personality you could imagine, and all of them, ALL of them, were beloved children of God. Not one of them was perfect, not one of them was beyond redemption, they were just parents and staff and students, struggling to balance a personal desire for validation with a common goal of seeking what was best for the children entrusted to our care.

While the words spoken about the Pharisee are harsh and even satirical – and the words spoken about the Publican are perhaps more charitable than he deserved – I can say with certainty that Christ’s goal in sharing this parable was not to create a new set of enemies. What I believe he did hope to do, was counter some of the preconceived notions, and bad first impressions, and hurt feelings, and grudges that may diminish our ability to be reconciled with others or even with our own life’s story. And so, with Christ at our side, we look at those with whom we share our lives – and we

look at the world around us – and we look at ourselves in the mirror – and we seek the depth of God’s own compassion, to help us see far more than we saw at first glance.

For the Pharisee within me, for the Publican within me; for the Pharisee around me, for the Publican around me; I pray to the God of grace to infuse my journey with honesty, and wisdom, and generosity of spirit, and love – and I share this hopeful prayer with all of you, and with all the world. May this be so. Amen.

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