

October 24, 2004

"Held in Contempt"

Luke 18:9-14

Preached by Rev. Dr. Ivy Beckwith

This whole section of Luke is an account of Jesus' teaching the crowds who followed him. Some of Jesus' teaching takes the form of question and answer and some of it takes the form of story or parable. Our passage today is one of those – a story.

Luke sets up Jesus' story by telling his readers and us that some of those Jesus was talking to were people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." How Luke knew this about this particular crowd – I'm not sure. Maybe Jesus had confided his opinion of the listeners to someone who later told Luke. Or maybe given the story itself Luke decided that these were the kind of people who Jesus thought needed to hear this story. These were people who were quite sure of their standing with God and who looked down their noses at people who, in their eyes and by their standards, didn't quite measure up.

Jesus tells of two men who went up to the temple to pray. Jesus describes one as a Pharisee and one as a tax collector. So who were these men, exactly? Well, the Pharisees were a group who practiced a certain form of Judaism. Just like today in Protestant Christianity we have different denominations who each have a bit of a different take on what Christian practice looks like, first century Judaism had several groups like the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes, for example, who had different takes on what Jewish practice and thought should look like. The Pharisees played a large role in the local synagogues through daily and weekly instruction in the law and worship. This was the group that created the "rabbinic" system that is still used in institutional Jewish practice today. They were laymen who devoted their lives to the study of the law. They were not of the priestly caste whose duties for the most part revolved around the temple.

Theologically speaking, Pharisees accepted the idea of a written law, the Torah, and an oral law which was a body of unwritten legal opinions intended to make the written law applicable to changing situations. This made them especially sensitive to the nuances of the law and caused them to follow the law in minute detail sometimes doing more than what the written law required. This practice often set them at odds with Jesus' teaching and way of life.

The tax collector was a Jewish man who worked under contract to the Roman occupiers of Israel to collect taxes for their government. These men did not generally come from wealthy circumstances and they were made to collect these taxes from their own neighborhoods from people who knew them well. Now for the Jews, paying taxes to the Roman Empire was abhorrent enough but to actually have one of their own doing the collecting of the taxes was stomach turning for them. And to make matters worse these tax collectors were allowed to keep a fraction of the taxes for themselves which sometimes turned them into extortionists calling for more taxes than were actually owed so they could make more money. These tax collectors were often called "licensed robbers" or "beasts in human shape." The rabbis or the Pharisees, especially, had no use or hope for these men. They were excluded from religious fellowship. The rabbis wouldn't take their money because it was considered tainted and they were deemed to be so untrustworthy they were not allowed to serve as a witness in court. So, Jesus, in this parable, sets up a confrontation with two people on seemingly opposite ends of the righteousness spectrum. This dichotomy would not have been lost on those listening to Jesus tell this story. Will Willimon, former dean of the chapel at Duke University, said in a sermon on this passage that for us to better understand this parable today Jesus' opening line might have been "a pope and a pimp went into St. Peter's to pray."

Then, Jesus focuses his attention on the action of the Pharisee. The man stands in the Temple and offers a prayer where he thanks God that he is not like other people – mostly really bad people – mentioning the also present tax collector specifically. Perhaps, he even pointed to him to make sure God saw the other man. Then, the Pharisee goes on to tell God why he is not like those people. He fasts twice a week and gives ten percent of his income back to God. Now there was really nothing unusual about the Pharisee's prayer. It was a custom for devout Jews to pray three times a day at 9 AM, noon, and 3 PM. And when possible it was better to do it at the temple in Jerusalem. Also, there are lots of examples of Jewish prayers where part of the prayer thanks God that the prayer is not like some other kind of person. And the actions described in the prayer were probably true. There is nothing to indicate the Pharisee was exaggerating his good works. According to the written law Jews only had one obligatory fast a year on the Day of Atonement but those who wished to gain special merit fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. Part of being a Pharisee was to act in such a way that went above and beyond what the written law required.

Then Jesus turns our attention to the tax collector who stands far off in the temple looking down at the floor. It is a stance of shame, humility and, perhaps, despair. The man, Jesus says, beats his breast and implores God with an imperative statement: "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" And that's the end of the story. Jesus finishes with some surprising explanation. He tells the crowd the loathsome tax collector went home justified before God, not the Pharisee. And then gives them some sobering words about humility. Jesus tells the crowd that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. Contentious words for a crowd who thought themselves righteous and better than most people. A contentious and subversive story for those expecting the piety of the Pharisee to be lauded and the hated tax collector ridiculed and barred from entry into the kingdom of heaven.

So what was Jesus about in this story? Let's talk first about what he was not about. This parable is not an example story. It is not an example of proper prayer and improper prayer. Jesus does not set up the Pharisee as a symbol of how one should not pray and the tax collector as an archetype of how one should pray. I'm not sure Jesus is at all concerned with the words used in the prayers. This story has much more far reaching implications than just being a lesson on prayer.

Also, Jesus does not use this story to simply set up a dichotomy between the tax collector and the Pharisee in order to contrast the hypocritical Pharisee with the outcast tax collector with the heart of gold. Years of Sunday School lessons and sermons on the life of Jesus have taught us to always cast the Pharisees as the "bad guys" in the Gospels. We look at anything the Pharisees do in these stories with a jaundiced eye ready to watch Jesus skewer these guys who just didn't get it. Then, we often pat ourselves on the back thankful that we are not like the Pharisees. We become pharisaic about the attitude of the Pharisees. We become like those in the crowd Jesus is targeting for their loathing of the tax collector, only we loath the character they identify with making us no better than those in the crowd. Which brings us in a rather circular way to, perhaps, the point Jesus was trying to make with this parable. I think Jesus is telling the crowd that no one who wants to follow him can look at others with contempt and pretend to know what their standing with God is no matter how tempting and satisfying it may be.

The Pharisee walks into the temple to pray. There is nothing to indicate that he is not a good man and that his assertions about his piety are not true. But, he makes one mistake that gives away what is inside his heart. When he thanks God that he is not like thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like that tax collector over there he shows his true colors. He shows contempt for those people by defining himself as better than they. He shows scorn and condescension toward them thus belying a pride in the human accomplishment of his piety. We see at that point that the Pharisee's righteousness is only skin deep and that he has uncoupled love of God from love of

neighbor, thus, nullifying any of the good, religious things and actions with which he fills up his life.

The tax collector walks into the temple to pray. There is nothing to indicate that he is anything more than those who hated him thought he was – a miserable traitor living off money extorted from extended family and friends. And he seems to know this. He looks at the floor and implores God to have mercy on him. He doesn't confess any litany of sins. He doesn't say he turns away from his sins. He humbly asks God to show him lovingkindness and compassion which his posture shows he understands he does not deserve. The tax collector walks away justified before God. The Pharisee for all his good works walks away empty handed.

Roberta Bondi writes of a day during her seminary training when she was appointed a substitute teacher for an adult Sunday School class. The lesson for the day was this one – Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. She writes this of her experience:

"The reading ended in chaos. Apparently there were people there who had not heard it before. 'What do you mean, one went home justified and the other did not?' demanded someone. 'Didn't the Pharisee do all those good things? Are you telling us they don't count for anything with God?' another challenged. 'And that tax collector,' someone else added. 'Did I hear you say that God doesn't judge sin.'

She writes that this experience made her never want to work in a church ever, again. But she goes on to say that she couldn't get the questions of the parable out of her head. After several years she ran into a explanation of the story from a monastic teacher by the name of Dorotheos of Gaza. Dorotheos preached this sermon to men in his community who were inflicting a lot of self-righteousness and judgementalism upon each other.

Dr. Bondi writes of what Dorotheos said: "Surprisingly, he did not use it to make his monks stop bragging, ignore their own good deeds and acknowledge they were sinners. Dorotheos said that the Pharisee was doing the right thing when he thanked God for giving him the ability to do good – the monks should themselves. The Pharisee only did one thing wrong: he passed judgement on the whole person of the tax collector and with scorn dismissed him and his whole life as worthless."

Will Willimon ends his sermon on this parable with the following story. And I end with this.

"I got talked into being on the board of this fraternity. They have been on probation ever since I've known them. They are so bad Dean Wasoliek only occasionally lets them serve tea in the afternoon, otherwise they're not allowed to have parties on campus. Bad

"Well, they call a board meeting on Palm Sunday afternoon. One of our biggest church days of the year and I'm over there in their section for this two-hour meeting.

"'Were you there when the sofa caught fire?' they were asked. 'It was all a misunderstanding,' they said.

"Such was the level of conversation. I'm sitting there thinking, 'What's a person like me doing among people like these on a Sunday like this?' I'm a preacher not a probation officer.

"Finally, the meeting ended. I'm heading for the door and pass this unshaved, beefy sort of person propping up a wall who says to me, 'That was a killer sermon today.'

"I was stunned. 'You, go to church?'

"Sure. I'm there most every Sunday. Sit on the back row. George (he gestures toward this other unshaven sort of person in an inappropriate tee shirt next to him) goes with me. George said he liked your sermon a couple of weeks ago better than today. But I needed the one you did today. It was like God really spoke to me.'

"Two men went to the Chapel to pray. One a Methodist preacher. The other an unshaved Sophomore in a tee shirt.

"Two men went back to the dorm. The later was justified, made right by God, but not the former.

"If you've got ears to hear, hear."