

Luke 18: 9-14

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt. ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week: I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’. I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Here’s another translation: The Message says it this way:

“He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: ‘Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: “Oh God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, crooks, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income”. Meanwhile, the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said “God, give me mercy. Forgive me, a sinner”. Jesus commented: “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

I had SUCH a good sermon ready on this text. I had worked on it some before I went away, and felt pretty good about it – it started by pointing out that this is one of the only stories Jesus told that was set in a place of worship. Most of Jesus’ stories were set in every day life; they are about farming, being a parent, making bread, getting married....you get the idea. This one though is about worship life. And the kinds of people who are always present when God’s people gather....and it’s not as easy to pick them out as you might think. So my sermon was going in a pretty good direction, (I thought!) and I had done my research and was being as faithful as I knew how to be with this parable. There’s a really impressive buildup from Luke as he asks us to consider what it is to live a life of prayer. In chapter 11 he tells us about the friend who goes next door at midnight to borrow bread for an unexpected guest. This, he says, has something to do with how it is to live a prayerful life. Praying is not much different from what happens every day in neighbourhoods and families. You ask for what you need because you have a relationship; you are friends and it’s the strength of the friendship that lets you ask even at midnight.....because you know your friend will be there for you.

Then in chapter 18, Luke asks us to consider unanswered prayer, and encourages us to keep at it even when the answers don’t come right away. And offers us the image of praying, searching for seeking for justice, and asking for what is right: and the image is of the One to whom we pray: God as a patient,

strong widow, never stopping NEVER STOPPING until we do what's right. It's beautiful. Prayer as putting ourselves in touch with, in the presence of, in friendship with the One who will not give up until justice is done. I don't know about you, but I really want to cultivate a relationship with a God like that.

And then, here, he seems to warn us against praying in a way that is not rooted in a real sense of who we are and in the ordinary grounded and messiness of our lives. To never let our prayer get all heady and removed from who we are and the real stuff of life.

It seems to me that this parable fits in as one in a series which taken together, tell us much more than any one of them does alone. So I worked on all of that....

And I was thinking to myself "I'm glad I'm not like other preachers who take the easy way, who don't see the big picture, and who caricature these characters" :0)

And then....

And then this week I watched, along with most of the country I would imagine, I watched the unbelievably horrendous story of Russell Williams. Did you see the W5 programme? And I had just re-read this parable as I listened to the news where they reported what he said when he was given a chance to speak - and he said something like...."I know you won't believe me but I'm sorry".

I'm struggling here because I'm not sure how to express how I feel about that and how it links to this parable. I tried running it past my sister and she said give it up - but I don't seem to be able to do that. I won't belabour it for the whole sermon but....do you see a connection? I wondered what would happen if that man were part of our congregation. How would we respond as a church family. And reading the text it's clear - so clear - that when we gather in worship we really have no idea what's going on in the inner life of the people around us. When I leave time for silent prayer....are there some praying like the Pharisee? Some like the tax collector? We simply don't know. We don't know what each others' private prayers are like, what our private lives are like, what demons we struggle with....

Another part of what made me go in this direction is also listening to the reactions of people as this story developed. So many people myself included voicing things like "what a monster, I'd like to get him in a room alone...I'd...." you know? And even though it's horrific beyond words, and it is....even so, is our reaction a little like the Pharisee, in that we think that WE would never do that; that WE are better than that, that somehow this is beyond our common humanity? I'm just asking that question and would very much like to have conversations with you about this.

Back to the text then: to get the most out of this encounter, we've got to know who it is we're dealing with: First, the Pharisee.

From reading some of the New Testament and listening to a lot of fairly shallow Christian interpretation, most of us have an impression that Pharisees are the bad guys: stereotyped villains - hypocrites. That is not true at all. Pharisees were highly respected - moral, religious people. This man - this Pharisee - was a religious leader. Educated, morally upright, faithful in worship, tithing more than was required. Pharisees in those days were the forward progressive religious types. They tried to interpret and apply

the religious law to the modern needs and situations of the people. That's why, for example, Pharisees were open to the idea of resurrection and the Saducees were not. The Saducees were the conservative "stick to the Bible" group. If it wasn't in the Bible then it wasn't for them. They tried to follow the Scriptures exactly and literally. The Pharisees on the other hand tried to see the intent of the scriptures and apply that to modern times and situations. Familiar isn't it? Those groups have always been and probably always will be in the body of believers.

So – here we have a Pharisee. You know this guy. He's the pillar of the church – he really tries hard. He's active in community service, a solid religious person. And so when he stands and says

Verse 11

He wasn't kidding. He wasn't lying, or covering up secret nasty deeds. He wasn't greedy, or dishonest, or adulterous. Maybe he had sacrificed a great deal to be that way; to do what he thought would please God. And he was thankful for being able to live a life like that. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT? When does that start to spill over into self righteousness? Would we know ourselves....if that started to happen to us? Is that what was happening to me when I sat watching the news and saying in essence Thank you God that I'm not like Russell Williams? Is that a form of self righteousness?

Then, there's the tax gatherer.

He's no hero. You know....a really nice guy who is just misunderstood. I think it robs the parable of some of its punch to see him as a rough tough guy with a heart of gold. Those characters are the stuff of cheap novels and movies of the week.

Tax collectors were traitors to their own people – despised, generally. Often, they kept a cut for themselves out of the taxes they gathered. They were hated by nearly everyone. Decent people had nothing to do with them. When he said "God be merciful to me, a sinner" – did he mean it? And whether or not he did, did he go back to his job? Does that matter to the story?

Two men. One respected, godly, faithful and religious. The other despised, a traitor, likely a cheater and extortioner.

And Jesus concludes by saying

Verse 14.

WHAT KIND OF GOD DOES THAT?

Lots of questions come from this – and I'm not sure that that's not Jesus' intent when he tells these stories. To make us go "wait a minute" and then talk about it and wrestle it out in our own minds and hearts.

Of all the things it does, today I think it asks us to consider again those we worship with. It pushes us to ask ourselves who WE are; the Pharisee or the tax collector, and to realize that probably we are both. Asks us how we treat one another even when we behave in ways that are horrific and despicable.

And in the end it drives us back to the only place that we can stand for sure. The only solid ground amid the questions that can overwhelm us. And that is the absolute undeserved unimaginable love and grace of God. God who loves the Pharisee and loves the tax collector too. God, who loves the sinner who repents

And loves the sinner who does not.

God who forgives the sin of the tax collector and forgives the sin of those who think they are better than that.

The grace of God is radical and shocking today as it was then. We do not, in the end, get what we deserve but rather we are welcomed and saved – made whole, by the absolute grace of God.

So it doesn't matter what we do then? It absolutely does.

But in this world, the world of the grace of God, our actions are not done to collect points with God but rather we do good works in joyful celebration – as a response – to a love that has claimed us and will continue to claim us the Pharisee in us and the tax collector in us

Let them live together in joyful response to the love and grace of God.