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Mercy

Luke 18:9-14

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I got to hear Moe preach on this text last night, and I'm indebted to him for some of these insights.

The lectionary this fall is giving us a long run in the gospel of Luke. Rog has been leading us through a sermon series on lessons from Jesus -- a Master Class. This message, and this text, picks up right where we left off last week.

Last week: "Always pray and never give up."

This morning: Two men go up to the temple to pray. And we hear these two contrasting prayers:

> The haughty prayer of the Pharisee—
> God, thank you that I'm so faithful and obedient, and not like *those* people—
>
> and the humble, simple, prayer of the tax collector—
> God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

The first prayer is a hot mess. More on that later.

But the tax collector's prayer is a familiar one. It sounds like the Psalms, the ones where the psalmist cries out to God for mercy. Like Psalm 51, after David commits adultery with Bathsheba. *Have mercy on me, O God!*

And in this section of Luke (think back to some recent sermons), we've heard the rich man in Hades crying out to Father Abraham and Lazarus for relief—*have mercy on me*—and the lepers crying out to Jesus for mercy before they are healed.

Dire straits. Met with God's mercy.

In the early church, the cry for mercy became a regular part of Christian worship:

Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy.
Christe eleison. Christ have mercy.
Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy.

This ancient Greek prayer has endured in Christian worship through the centuries. I have said these words, and sung these words, many times.

So many times that when I find myself in this story, I automatically side with the tax collector. Almost by sheer impulse.

Clearly, in this story, that's the right side to be on. And isn't that where I belong?

I mean, this Pharisee is pretty off-putting. Stuck up. Arrogant. Luke, in general, does not put the Pharisees in a favorable light. The Pharisees were teachers, experts in the Jewish religious law. (Think Leviticus.) But in the gospels, Jesus doesn't seem to have much patience for their religiosity. He'd rather break their rules and go to a party with the outcasts. Like tax collectors. People that Jesus willingly chooses to hang out with, even when it goes against social norms.

If you spend enough time in the gospels, you start to think: Pharisee, bad. Tax collector, good.

Because that's how Jesus sees it, right? Don't be like the Pharisee. Be like the tax collector. That's the point of this story… right?

But this is a parable. Which is important.

I've long been familiar with this story, but I don't usually recall it as a parable. I guess I always just kind of thought that Jesus saw these guys in the temple one day and made some observations and comments about them. Like the time he saw the widow give her two last coins.

That this is a *parable* means that the Pharisee and the tax collector aren't real people. They're characters in a story that Jesus made up to make a point.

The problem for us is we no longer feel instinctively the way Jesus' first hearers would have felt about these characters. Familiarity with the gospels has actually led to an inverse emotional response.

For Jesus' listeners, the Pharisees were respected and honored, leaders in the community. If you think about someone you trust and respect – a church leader, perhaps, or a not-for-profit executive – someone you see as doing good in the world, that feeling will get you close to how the people in Jesus' community viewed Pharisees. This is supposed to be the good guy in the story.

> And there's some truth to that.
>
> The Pharisees cared deeply about following Torah, following God's law. They took to heart the word of God: Be holy as I am holy. Their prescribed rituals and their emphasis on obedience were all based on a desire to experience holiness in everyday life. Israel had lost its way many times over the years, with disastrous political consequences—like the current Roman occupation. Strict Torah observance was the path back to prosperity and Jewish autonomy.
>
> And it's quite possible that the Pharisees are often found in dialogue with Jesus not because he had so much against them but because he too cared about their primary interests. What does it mean to live as a holy people? What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength—and to love your neighbor as yourself?

Pharisees get a bad rap. But Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Paul was a Pharisee. There was an earnestness to Pharisees that we lose if we only characterize them as self-righteous snobs.

> It's perhaps worth noting here that the Pharisees, while Jewish leaders and teachers, aren't the only Jews in this story.
>
> Jesus is a Jew. Jesus shows up, God made flesh, with all the particularities of ethnicity and culture and language and history and place. Jesus shows up as a first century Palestinian Jew. Sandal-clod, tunic-wearing, sun on his skin, dust in his probably not-blonde hair, Aramaic on his lips.
>
> And maybe, if he was anything like his countrymen, with the weight of Roman oppression on his mind.

The tax collectors were Jews too.

But that only made their work – collecting taxes from their fellow Jews to inflate the wealth and power of Rome – all the more despicable. These were people who had sided with the oppressor just so they could line their pockets with the hard-earned pennies of their neighbors. They were opportunistic and dishonest and they'd earned every ounce of social contempt they received. They were, in a word, traitors. (*spit*)

> How dare you treat others like that? How dare you treat *us* like that? Your own flesh and blood? You selfish son-of-a…

The tax collector is the person in this story that everyone hates. Because everyone knows their business and it stinks. And add to that the rage of those who've been wronged but are powerless to bring about justice.

> In a day when one man's villain is another man's hero, it's really risky to give examples of contemporary "tax collectors." So maybe just think of the first person – or type of person – that you are inclined to hate.
>
> And that feeling will get you close to how Jesus' first hearers felt about the tax collector.

In this parable, a reputable person enters the temple and thanks God for those good things that bolster his reputation, status, and sense of wellbeing. For the Pharisee, it's Torah observance.

> For us, maybe it'd sound more like a prayer of thanks for our parenting, or privilege, or place of origin, or political persuasion.

And a despicable person enters the temple and, with grand gestures of grief, pleads for mercy.

The parables of Jesus are often shrouded in mystery. But in this instance (like last week… pray and never give up), Luke sets it up quite plainly. He gives the reason for the parable in the first verse of our text:

> "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable."

Another translation puts it this way:

> "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

Looking down on, or regarding with contempt. The Greek word here literally means something like "completely reduce to nothing." Despise. Give zero worth to.

Jesus told this parable to those who felt confident in their own rightness and goodness, and who viewed others with contempt. (Deplorables, perhaps?)

It's a very human impulse. To despise others and to puff ourselves up. Maybe our tax collectors are different today. Maybe our prayers are different today. But the impulse is the same.

> God, I thank you that I'm not caught up in all that woke stuff.
> God, I thank you that I'm not caught up in conspiracy theories or climate change denial.
> God, I thank you that I'm pro-life.
> God, I thank you that I'm anti-racist.
> God, I thank you that I've got a good head on my shoulders and can see things the way they really are.
>
> Unlike those people….

“He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

As one scholar said, this parable sets a trap. Whichever way you swing it, as soon as you’ve set up a good guy and a bad guy, you’ve fallen in. Because you were looking at the wrong thing.

What if the problem in this parable is primarily a matter of focus?

See, somehow in the Pharisee’s emphasis on holiness, he has lost sight of the holiness of God. He has instead become enamored of his own holiness, his own righteousness.

> Which is an easy enough perspective to maintain if you consistently compare yourself with those who are worse off, less than, not good. “At least I’m not ____” effectively uses others to feel better about yourself.

But the tax collector comes to the temple, comes face to face with his own despicableness in the face of a holy God, and in the shadows, beats his breast and cries, God have mercy on me, a sinner.

> God, this is who I am.
>
> Help.

Now, convention would expect him to offer some restitution, to make things right. We get no indication in this parable whether he’ll pay people back. Not even a promise or word of intent.

But, either way, Jesus—to probable gasps from his listeners—says this man goes home justified, right with God. Without doing a thing to earn it.

He got the mercy he asked for. Outrageous, audacious mercy.

For years, I worked and worshipped with an Anglican church in Wheaton. I started as a single woman, trekking out every Saturday from my home in Chicago. Over time, I added a boyfriend, fiancé, then husband to that trip, then one kid in the backseat, then two, then three. (Kind of like the game of Life…)

That Anglican church was Moe’s introduction to living with liturgy, letting these time-honored patterns of worship shape us, settle us, pastor us, and unite us with the global and historic church. *Things we pray that worship at Hope does for you as well.*

One of the things that both Moe and I came to appreciate most over those years was the weekly spoken confession from the Book of Common Prayer:

> "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us."

Inevitably, there'd be weeks where just the process of getting to church – with diaper bags and crying babies and whiny toddlers and binders of music and instruments and snacks for everyone and traffic on the expressway – meant we'd arrive at church with gobs of tension between us.

(Please tell me I'm not the only one.)

> Beneath that happy church veneer, we weren't our best selves. We were pretty awful people capable of saying and doing pretty awful things. We might be able to hide that from others, but we couldn't hide it from each other. Or from our kids.

So service would start and we'd smile and sing through that tension. And then we'd get to that prayer of confession. And with my own head bowed, I'd hear this man beside me, who I loved, who I'd married, whose faults and flaws I knew—and who knew mine in return—speak aloud those words, our voices saying together these hard, uncomfortable truths before God and before one another:

> We confess that we have sinned.
> We have not loved you. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
> We are truly sorry.

And at that point, whatever contempt we still harbored toward each other fell away. Other things might still remain—sadness, anger, frustration, hurt, the need to talk about (____)—but contempt? That lost its power.

How could I dare confess my own sins before God, and still pretend to "stand above" this person who now kneels beside me as a fellow sinner? I am in no better standing before God. All my supposed merits are chaff in the wind. All is mercy, all is grace. For him and me alike. And for all who kneel before the cross and plead for mercy.

Tish Harrison Warren puts it this way:

> "Confession reminds us that none of us gather for worship because we are 'pretty good people.' But we are *new* people, people marked by grace in spite of ourselves because of the work of Christ… Our failures or successes in the Christian life are not what define us or determine our worth before God or God's people. Instead, we are defined by

> Christ's life and work on our behalf. We kneel. We humble ourselves together. We admit the truth. We confess and repent. Together, we practice the posture that we embrace each day—that of a broken and needy people who receive abundant mercy."[1]

Moe and I have kept that confession prayer as part of our weekly rhythm at Grace in Garfield, and in so doing, have introduced it to our teammates and friends. Over time, they have come to treasure that moment in the liturgy for many of the same reasons we do. It slowly chisels away at the pretense so common in church life and makes space for us to be not okay. To be real. To be rough around the edges.

And to extend to one another, and receive from one another, the grace that God has extended to us.

> What draws us and holds us together? Only the mercy of God.
>
> And it's hard to hold mercy alongside contempt.
>
> So let's hold it with humility instead.
>
> Amen?

[1] *Liturgy of the Ordinary,* p. 57.