

Unconditional Love

St. Mary the Virgin

Proper 25

October 23, 2022

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Luke 18:9 Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: ¹⁰“Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ ¹³But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.” (CEB)

This is one of the well-known parables of the New Testament. It is unique to Luke. No parallels in Matthew or Mark. It is also one of the most difficult to understand parables in the Gospels. This is the third time I’ve preached off of this text at St. Mary’s. I first encountered it with you in 2013 and I took another stab at it in 2019. This is my third attempt to figure out what it means and it differs from my first two accounts, particularly to my sermon in 2019.

Luke is frequently confused by the stories he relates in his Gospel. He’s not alone in this. For instance the parable of the Sower, found in each of the Synoptics¹, confounds them all. Jesus is simply describing how a normal farmer would sow seed, in Palestine. This made no sense to farmers in fertile lands so they allegorized it. Most farmers plant seed where they want it to grow. They don’t broadcast it willy-nilly. But Palestinian soil is rocky and cannot be successfully plowed so seed is scattered willy-nilly. If we don’t know how seed was sown in Judea the parable is confusing. Likewise, we don’t know much about first century Pharisees or Tax Collectors, so today’s parable is confusing.

In a similar vein we read in Matthew 10 Jesus’ disciples came and said to him, “Why do you use parables when you speak to the crowds?”¹¹ Jesus replied, “Because they haven’t received the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but you have. ¹²For those who have will receive more and they will have more than enough. But as for those who don’t have, even the little they have will be taken away from them. ¹³This is why I speak to the crowds in parables: although they see, they don’t really see; and although they hear, they don’t really hear or understand. (CEB)

This is total nonsense. Jesus spoke in parables because they were absolutely clear to those who heard him, but the context of culture and geography was so different for the Evangelists from that of Galilee and Judah that statements that were

¹ Matt 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15

clear to those who heard Jesus were obscure to the early church in Syria, Turkey, Greece and elsewhere.

I think of today's parable and many of the other parables in the Gospels, as sermon examples cut loose from the sermon so we have to guess the original context. Luke was not a good guesser. So the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a sermon example. The question is, what was the point of the sermon?

Before I get to that let me share on a more personal note. I've devoted my life to studying the bible so my take on parables is clear to me but may seem challenging to you. I've also devoted my life to teaching bible to lay people and that teaching will resume in two weeks when we begin the study of Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians. I hope you will join us. I hope to bring light to challenging texts and your participation and comment helps me find that light.

To me the church, especially St. Mary's, is important for many reasons and they include learning how the bible is the story of how God relates to us. This primarily happens in church where we wrestle with the many difficult passages in the bible.

We are in the midst of our pledge drive for 2023. So I want to say something to you this morning about money and stewardship in a way which won't offend you and might lead you to increase, or begin, your support through pledging to this church. So my quiet pitch is, if you want to learn what it means to be Christian, if you want to learn how to enrich your life through faith, then this church is crucial and the more you support it the more it will continue to help you and me wrestle with the bible and the living of a faithful life. We have a living breathing faith that is reflected in the way St. Mary's carries out our mission and a crucial part of that is by how we financially support this congregation. For most of us pledging is the most tangible way we can be part of the ministry of St. Mary's. So, this is a gentle push to pledge more. You're also invited to think about tithing Time and Talent. This sermon and the classes I teach here are part of my pledge, but cash is important too. It's hard to ask people for money without being self-disclosing. Barbara and I tithe, we split it up among a number of churches and nonprofits, but St. Mary the Virgin gets the largest portion of that tithe.

Now, to return to our text; this is a text which has much to say about how we are the church. Are we the church when we lead lives that conform to certain behaviors? For instance does faith demand that we take conservative morality positions on how we express ourselves? Or does faith demand of us that we seek to change the world to care for what God cares about, that is, social action?

Parables come to us with interpretations by, in this case, Luke, which may or may not reflect the teaching that Jesus intended. As I stated in my opening, Luke and the other evangelists frequently didn't understand the teaching that Jesus gave, whether in parable or by example story, and they added comments that made sense to them. We have in this morning's Gospel Luke's attempt to understand a teaching from Jesus that made no sense to him. If we strip away his interpretation, we are left with:

Luke 18¹⁰ "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers,

adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ ¹³ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ (CEB)

Luke has added the interpretation that the prayer of the Tax Collector is acceptable and the prayer of the Pharisee is not. If we did not know this editorializing by Luke would we be so likely to condemn the Pharisee and so eager to identify with the Tax Collector? We learn of the Pharisee that he is a very observant person. Exactly the kind of Episcopalian we most hope to have. He tithes and he fasts. He is faithful to his wife, he is honest in his business dealings and he is a moral man. For Luke, but probably not for Jesus, the only problem with him is his comparing his piety and lifestyle with that of the Tax Collector.

The Tax Collector is the figure we are accustomed to hearing praised in this reading, but if we read the passage without the interpretation do we come to the same conclusion? I think not. Jewish Tax Collectors were reviled by everyone. The Romans had hit on a wonderful way of collecting taxes. They in essence gave the franchise to the mafia and told the mafia to extort all it could but a certain amount had to be turned over to Rome. It worked for the Romans, it was lucrative for the Tax Collectors and it alienated the people.

Having stripped away the interpretations we are left with two caricatures of prayer, neither one of which really makes us comfortable. The Pharisee fails on two counts. The most obvious is that he compares himself, favorably, to the Tax Collector. But he also fails because he believes that prayer is a time to remind God of how virtuous he is so that God knows that the Pharisee is worthy. I’ve done a lot of reading on this text this week². This is after all the third time I’ve preached on this text at St. Mary’s, and I wanted to say something different. I discovered that the prayer of the Pharisee is a misrepresentation of the way a Pharisee would actually pray. Pharisaic prayer was not a rehearsal before God of all of my many faithful accomplishments but instead was a prayer for God’s mercy, with confidence that the mercy was real and would be granted. Assuming Jesus is the originator of this parable he has made the Pharisee into a Straw Man to show the folly of counting on our own efforts and not on God’s mercy.

What of the Tax Collector? He too is a Straw Man who does not know how to pray. He betrays no confidence that he is loved by God. He grovels. Whatever prayer is it is not meant to be groveling before God. The Tax Collector would’ve been better served by confessing his sins and expressing confidence that he was nevertheless loved by God. That would’ve led to transformation. As it is we have no idea whether or not the Tax Collector gave up his profession or went back to it feeling that he’d groveled enough for God to continue to be interested in him.

What could Jesus have meant? Both prayers assume that God’s welcome is conditional and restricted as opposed to the message of Jesus, which is that God’s welcome is unconditional and unrestricted. How can this be good news?

² Particularly helpful were F. Gerald Downing, “The Ambiguity of “The Pharisee and the Toll-collector” Luke (18:9-14) in the Greco-Roman World of Late Antiquity.” *CBQ*, (1992) 57/1, pp 80-99 and Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, HarperOne, 2014, pp. 169-196.

People who take comfort in this parable as normally understood have to do so by assuming that they can identify with the Tax Collector. People who see themselves as being more like the Pharisee have never been able to take comfort from this parable. I know that, as a professional Christian, I am much more the Pharisee than Tax Collector. I know that from time-to-time my silent secret prayer is one of wondering how bad things could happen to me when after all I have given my life to the church? This type of secret prayer makes me feel guilty and then I find myself praying, also secretly, the prayer of the Tax Collector and I can truthfully say that in this circular reasoning I never get anyplace.

However, if God's call to us is unconditional and without restrictions what are the benefits of responding to the invitation? That might have been the question posed to Jesus. To imagine a context in which Jesus would tell this parable we need to guess at the question that lies behind it. Perhaps a disciple asked Jesus about how to have confidence that he would be saved? Jesus might have replied that if you have a choice between a Pharisee and a Tax Collector who do you think has the best chance to be saved? The disciple would have said—Pharisee. However, it's a trick question. The correct answer is neither.

I believe we live in a culture that is still wrestling with these questions. On the one hand we have a group of Christians who are convinced that the way to earn heaven is to be very clear about our position on sexual sins. They assume that God above all cares about potential life so that abortion is always a sin while childcare is an expense we just can't afford. They assume that strong borders are consistent with Christianity and that God really prefers Americans to all others, especially white Americans.

It's easy to characterize the pseudo pharisaic portion of today's reality.

How about the Tax Collector? Who is the Tax Collector today? Many of us are clearer about how the conservatives are wrong than we are on how we are to change and live a faithful life confident that God loves us. Many in our society have given up all hope for a loving God. Some designate themselves as Spiritual But Not Religious. They point out the many sins of the church and so-called organized religion and reject it and in rejecting it lose much of the wisdom we've accumulated over the centuries.

Others are convinced that while there might be a higher power it is naïve to believe that this divine force cares for humanity. We are not worthy of being cared for. This is perhaps a form of Aristotle's belief in the Unmoved Mover.

Many of us on the Tax Collector side live in despair. Nothing we do seems to be enough and we see Martin Luther King's assertion *that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice*³ to be at best wishful thinking and probably wrong and naïve.

Many have lost hope. The church has lost hope. Decades ago we stopped offering systemic change in favor of offering individual salvation. There is no hope for the community if we are saved as individuals. In today's parable another mistake the Pharisee and the Tax Collector made was to see themselves as discrete individuals.

³ In his sermon: **Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution** delivered at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

They live in fear not hope and pray for their individual salvation and not the inbreaking kingdom of God.

In reality we are enmeshed in a community and confidence of God's love is the key to living in the promise given us by our Lord that we are uniquely as a church loved by God and can therefore go out to work to change the world. Fear is banished and we can dare to act in hope.

To admit that we are loved unconditionally is to dare to act in a way that requires us to sin boldly⁴. Our lives are not constrained by living according to rules and customs that bind us from acting freely.

So, I hope you will join me in increasing your pledge to the life changing work of this parish and if you're intrigued, in our study of the bible beginning in two weeks.

We are neither the Pharisee nor the Tax Collector. We are on a journey as part of this worshipping community to live in Christ's love with such confidence that we dare to work to change the world, beginning here, to be more like Heaven. Our lives are not a test to see if we're worthy of eternal life. Our lives in faith are the means that we bring heaven to earth. We can only do this if we have confidence that we live in the Love of God.

⁴ Full quote is: Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly. Or in Luther's Latin: **Pecca Fortiter, sed fortius fide et gaude in Christ.** Contained in a letter to his fellow reformer Philip Melancthon in 1521.