

North Kildonan United Church

23rd October 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

II Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18

Luke 18: 9-14

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. By your Spirit make yourself known to us through the reading and preaching of your Word, that we might be faithful witnesses in this life and joyful companions in the next, even with Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

As those of us who have prepared worship services know, it's rarely a simple or easy task to pull everything together in time for Sunday worship. The question always before us is "what shall we sing"? Immediately followed by "will they know the hymns chosen"?

As I was thinking about today's hymn choices, the final words of our gospel were rolling around in my mind: *"for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

What might we sing that echoes the theme of humility? *"Seeking to be, seeking to be, lowly and humble, a learner of thee"* came to mind, but what hymn contains these words I wondered? I checked out the hymnbook and thought about those words, then at last it came to me. The hymn was *"Come, let us sing of a wonderful love"*, which we just did.

"Lowly and humble, a learner of thee". These words might describe, to a certain degree, the attitude of the contrite tax-collector. They do not describe in any way the Pharisee.

So we begin this day with a Pharisee and a tax collector praying in the temple. To help us understand this parable, we turn to Matt Skinner of Luther Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota. In his commentary he writes:

"The Pharisee in the parable isn't wrong to be grateful that he isn't a tax collector. He knew that that professional choice was available to him if he wanted to take it. But he didn't. Soaking the Galilean population as a Roman stooge might have given him an easier path toward a more comfortable life. But his faith, his privilege, or his values took him in a different direction. Thank God.

There's no arrogance in his belief that he chose or inherited a better way. Where he falls short in the parable is in his unspoken assumption that the tax collector resides beyond the limits of divine mercy. Whether he actually hears the tax collector's prayer or not, he wrongly assesses the tax collector and his dignity. What's even more tragic: he misunderstands God."

He continues: "If I heard your prayers, I'd misread your motives. Worse, I'd want to play God by deciding which prayers are worth considering. Like the Pharisee in the parable, I'd assume that your prayer for mercy (like the tax collector's) wasn't sincere enough to get God's attention. Or, like many misled readers of the parable, I'd assume that your prayer of thanksgiving (like the Pharisee's) wasn't a real prayer but a self-gratifying expression of your own high regard for yourself.

Be careful about what you assume. Don't make narrow the wideness in God's mercy. We don't know what God hears when God listens to the prayers of the world.

We do know this, however: that no one resides beyond the reach of God's compassion and God's desire to reconcile. We also know that the prayer *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!* is a perfectly good place for anyone to begin." So writes Matt Skinner.

Now that commentary is from a Christian addressing a Christian audience. What if we consult some Jewish sources in order to understand what's going on in this parable.

In the Jewish Annotated New Testament, we find these comments:

"Some readers dismiss the Pharisee as hypocritical, sanctimonious, and legalistic, and in turn identify with the tax collector, the repentant, humble and justified sinner. This approach is not surprising, given that Luke has presented numerous maleficent Pharisees as well as several admirable tax collectors. However, once readers choose to identify with the tax collector and reject the Pharisee, the parable traps them: to conclude in effect, 'God, I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee...' places readers in the very position they condemn. Moreover, this interpretation overlooks the Pharisee's numerous excellent qualities: tithing, fasting, giving thanks without asking for something in return."

So how might the original audience understand what Jesus was saying? I should preface this by saying that in the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were not necessarily bad guys. In fact, much of their belief around life after death, interpretation of the law, and so on was in keeping with the teaching of Jesus. So what they may have understood was Jesus criticizing the Pharisee the same way that the teachers of his day criticized super pious Pharisees.

In the commentary [Preaching the Gospel without blaming the Jews](#), the authors write: "The Rabbis joked about overly pious Pharisees who walked mincingly to show their piety and bled from the forehead from bumping into obstacles because they walked with their eyes closed to avoid temptation, bent over Pharisees demonstrating their humility, and the boringly dutiful Pharisees who *always* did the right thing."

Contemporary rabbis of the time when the Gospels were written said this: "I am a creature of God, and my neighbour is also his creature; my work is in the city and his is in the field; I rise early to my work, and he rises early to his. As he cannot excel in my work, so I cannot excel in his work. But perhaps you say, I do great things and he does

small things. We have learned that it matters not whether a man does much or little, if only he directs his heart to heaven."

Or Rabbi Gamaliel, who died in AD 52, also around the time the gospels were being formed, wrote: "Do not walk out on the community. And do not have confidence in yourself until the day you die. And do not judge your companion until you are in his place." Another rabbi, Rabbi Simeon, wrote: "and when you pray, don't treat your praying as a matter of routine; but let it be a plea for mercy and supplication before the Omnipresent, the blessed, as it is said, *For he is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and full of mercy, and repents of the evil.*"

No doubt the original audience would have been shocked to hear that the tax collector was vindicated, justified, in right relationship with God. Even though he made no promise to change his ways, to clean up his act, to quit cheating his fellow citizens, he still had a sense of being forgiven. He knew he needed God's grace and mercy and he asked for it: "God be merciful to me, a sinner", and he received what he asked for.

This is a parable. We expect parables to have a twist to them. So perhaps the twist is that this is a story, an example of the wild, extravagant forgiving love of God, not just for some, but for all.

And what of the Pharisee. His prayer was full of contempt for the tax collector. He assumes his corrupt neighbour has situated himself beyond God's mercy when in truth he has not.

He was full of contempt and disdain for the tax collector. What is disdain? It is the manifestation of a belief that we know better than God who should receive mercy and how they should receive it.

All kinds of people, us included, are capable of either contrition or contempt. Those attitudes express themselves in how we view our neighbours and in the theologies we rely upon to guide our daily lives.

A number of years ago I was asked to conduct a funeral for a person I did not know. Not the first time that has happened. In the course of the service, I had offered the hope that Jesus has prepared a place in the heavenly home for all people, not just some. As my one-time minister, Ernie Johnston, once said to me regarding baptism, always err on the side of grace – baptize even if you are not sure the promises made will be promises kept.

So, I offered what I understood, and still understand, to be a word of hope and grace and welcome. After the service a woman came storming over to me and told me in no uncertain terms what she thought of the idea that everyone gets into heaven. "My faith is very important to me," she declared, "and not just anyone can go to the Father's house." As I remember it, what was more important to her was the limited admission her particular brand of Christianity preached. She was going to be in that number and

the rest can just go to.... I'll let you fill in that part yourself. It's odd to hear a person speak with anger and condemnation about the joy and welcoming grace of heaven.

I guess she's never read this parable.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, I was once asked to conduct a funeral for a Lutheran woman. I was asked because at her husband's service a number of years earlier, the Lutheran pastor said: "I didn't know this man, so I don't know if he's going to heaven or not." After that there was no way a Lutheran pastor was going to say something like that about her.

What a statement to make. As I always tell people who ask me to pray for good weather at their particular outdoor event or wedding, and this statement fits with the ill-chosen words of the pastor—"I'm in sales, not management." It's not for any of us, especially clergy, to place limits on God's grace or to sit in judgement on who is welcome and who is turned away.

In the great words of the hymn writer Frederick William Faber:
*There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven
There is no place where earth's failings
have such gracious judgement given.*

Or as we so recently sang:
*Jesus the Saviour this gospel to tell
joyfully came, joyfully came,
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame,
seeking the lost, seeking the lost,
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.*

Humility is front and centre within this parable, as it is in our life in Christ. So let us end with this quote by William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury back in the 1940s.

"Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all. . . . The humility which consists in being a great deal occupied about yourself, and saying you are of little worth, is not Christian humility. It is one form of self-occupation and a very poor and futile one at that." Amen.