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October 24, 2010  
Luke 18: 9-14

### A CHRISTIAN, BUT...

I'm worried about something...not one of those "What are we going to do about healthcare?" kinds of worries...more of a "Did I leave the front porch light on when I left?" kind of worries. I'm worried that after I'm done with this sermon there may be some of you who look at the bulletin, read the sermon title and wonder what it had to do with anything I said. So, here's the disclaimer. Sometimes I turn in those titles long before I've done anything more than have some preliminary thoughts about the sermon. I may have read the texts and decided a direction I might go, but I usually change my mind...just ask our secretary, Helen. This week we turned them in even earlier so that Helen could have a Fall Break. So, between Wednesday, when I turned the title in, and today when I'm giving this sermon...things changed...a lot. And while I don't really like titles, I feel obliged to marry them to the sermon in some fashion since that's the name by which they're known for the rest of their lives...on the website, in printed form, in the podcast...the sermon always linked to this phrase that I rather arbitrarily make up pretty early in the process. So, maybe in your head just call this one "untitled", despite what it says on the paper. Or maybe the sermon title should be, "A Christian but...One Who Changes His Mind a Lot."

That's pretty long, but it actually makes more sense. And it relates to this parable too. I change my mind about what I think it means also. This parable is so closely linked with last weeks'...they really belong together. That's part of the problem with our literate contention with oral traditions...we lose the impact of a parable. We end up talking about it instead of letting it talk to us. And in this case, the lectionary (out of necessity) splits two stories that work together into two separate weeks. Maybe you remember in great detail what I preached on last week - you're better than me if you do - but it still isn't the same as hearing one story immediately after the other.

So the unjust judge parable is supposed to be fresh on our ears as we hear this tale of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The call to “pray always and not lose heart” should be echoing in our heads as Jesus then recounts this seemingly dualistic story of two people engaging in that “always” kind of praying as a warning to those who trust in themselves for their righteousness. That’s Luke’s typical ploy, to tell you up front what the parable is about. It’s a nice idea but, of course, like anything once you have written something down it becomes its own thing...as a writer we have little control over our words once they are out there in reading land. And parables are even more like this – multifaceted, many sided gems that continue to spark new light as you turn them different directions.

This is not to say that people don’t try to make them about one thing. The “standard” interpretation of this parable is that works do not justify us, grace does. But I’ll be honest, that sounds really nice in a deep theological discussion over coffee on a winter day, but I’m not really sure how satisfying that is at any other time.

What is satisfying is what this parable says to us about how we live our lives, about how best to be what Jesus was – human in the most divine way possible. We might want to see ourselves in one character or another, but we are both of them, truth be told. We all have elements of the self-righteous and the humble in us, it’s just that those sides put up a better fight in some versus others. This parable is the tale of justification, which sounds like another theological word for the coffee talk, but is really much more.

Justification is a tricky idea in Greek. Passively, it can be a legal term meaning to be acquitted in a court of law. But it also gets used actively to talk about a change of heart. Justification is a big deal to Paul, for instance, who is trying to emphasize people’s transformation, their “change of heart” upon their encounter with Christ. Now justification might not hold your attention, but transformation is another thing altogether. This parable is talking about something fundamental. How do we change? How do we, in a world that is changing with or without us, contend with those shifts? And in this parable, who gets “transformed”? Well, one might argue that the Pharisee has some surface transformation...we don’t know what his life was like before he began to follow the law with such exactness. But we can see that the tax collector finds transformation in a state of profound humility. He finds justification in letting go.

In the movie Good Will Hunting, the main characters of Sean, played by Robin Williams, and Will, played by Matt Damon, really act as transformational characters for one another. Through their time as counselor and client they interact in tough, sometimes cruel and often cathartic ways. They are both “Southies” – having been raised in South Boston where they learned not to take any junk from anyone. So neither lets their role as client or counselor interfere with what they are seeking to pull out of the other. Sean, lost in grief for his dead wife, is stuck. Will, unable to

see beyond his macho facade or deal with any sense of vulnerability, is wrecking good opportunities in his life – both with his education and his relationships. Their ultimate confrontation of one another's "bull" tears those wounds open in a way that allows them to see their own need to change. Oddly it is Sean who needs a bit more confidence and Will who needs some humility. And those lessons transform them as the movie draws to a close. How might this story be different if the Pharisee had embraced his clearly suffering fellow praying soul? How might they both have been transformed then?

See I don't think that it is as simple as the Pharisee is the bad example and the tax collector the good example. Parables rarely let us off that easy....I think the key is balance. For instance, there is a tendency right here in the progressive Christian community to look down our noses at our more evangelical or fundamentalist brothers and sisters. So, we have to avoid the tendency to self-correct the Pharisees' judging piety with our own judging piety, lest we seem like we're saying, "Well, thank God I'm not like that Fundamentalist." In our "either-or" framework, though, that leaves us looking to the tax collector as our model. After all, this is what Jesus usually does with parables...offer up the most marginalized and "unclean" as our models for right behavior. That should work here, only I'm not convinced that the tax collector is a great model of spirituality either.

I mean let's just extend the models a bit, shall we? One is a model of self-righteousness and when that gets extended out then you end up with the kind of holy presence you might expect from a talk show host or art critic...far too much confidence, not enough humility. But confidence in and of itself isn't bad. I try and teach my boys to be confident, but that there are boundaries to that and many other characteristics. The line between virtue and vice is often only one of volume...or even in what direction that virtue is aimed.

My boys had brought home one of these slips from Mad Skills – a Bible verse that they were to memorize. It looked to me like a paraphrase from Matthew where Jesus instructs us, as the slip of paper said, to "not be stingy". So I had to explain what stinginess was and when I said that it was like when Ian was asked to share his water after a soccer game and gave his brother only two little drops or when Alec was asked to share his new toy and he said "only for a minute". Well, the boys picked right up on that and began to rat each other out on the various ways that the other person had been stingy. "Boys", I had to interject, "The idea is that you are looking for stinginess in yourself, not in other people." Jesus' call is directionally dependent.

Of course the other model is one of self-deprecation. Now again a healthy measure of criticism is important for us to be able to apply it to ourselves, but again it is a fine line before that becomes self-abuse. Humility, like confidence, has to come with limits. I don't think that it is any more spiritual to be on the extremes of

either side...confident to the point of arrogance or humble to the point of self-abuse. Those were the very things that haunted both Will and Sean. Amazingly it was grace that healed them both. That scene in which Sean holds Will and says over and over, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault." That is grace. The exact thing that I think the tax collector hears after his prayer of profound anguish. And it is grace that Sean experiences when he sees Will driving off to repair his life and he knows that he can too.

The real question in this parable is not who we are – are we the Pharisee or the tax collector – the real question is what is happening despite the actions of either character? Not what are we doing, but what is God doing? And in this case, God is doing that wonderful and amazing work of grace...humbling the lofty and elevating the humble.

And that's a pretty good model for the church. Unfortunately we normally get the Pharisee's model. And here's where my edited title works because here's where I change my mind. I may have been talking about transformation, but I really think that this parable is about sin.

When you see the Pharisee as the bad guy and the tax collector as the good guy, which is very tempting, then you also associate their behaviors with good and bad. But this is a parable and such characterizations rob it of its power. Unfortunately we are so far removed from the cultural context that this parable becomes nothing more than a story. We don't hear it like Jesus' audience would have.

Pharisees were not the bad guys, they were the guys who believed that the law held morality and to obey it was how one achieved righteousness. A tax collector, in comparison, was a collaborator with the Roman authorities...a traitor to many people. So probably to the audience in Jesus' time this was a reversal...but not really to us.

One of my favorite bloggers, scholar Sarah Dylan Breuer, gives a remarkable reminder to those of us who think that Pharisee=bad guy...especially those of us in the progressive wing of Christianity who tend to equate the Pharisees with fundamentalists. She says, "For starters, the Pharisees were not the fundamentalists of their time. They did not read scripture literally. They understood that the laws given to Moses while the people were nomadic herders needed to be interpreted to suit changing circumstances. And the Pharisees were remarkably inclusive...they received Gentile converts with great joy. As for justice issues, we pretty much owe it to the Pharisees that the prophetic works like Isaiah, Micah, and Amos are in the canon; the Sadducees saw these works as newfangled innovations and not canon...The Pharisees longed for what Christians long for: God's will done on earth as it is in heaven, and all nations streaming into Zion to enjoy God's just and

compassionate rule.”

That sounds like a program that would fit in most of our progressive communities, not a recipe for fundamentalism.. This Pharisee is being presented as a person who most listeners would think of as a good guy, or at least a respectable one. But I do think that you can hear a cup of snooty being added to the recipe. The text says that he was "standing by himself", but the Greek is a little ambiguous. It could also say that he was praying to himself. I imagine him standing alone, so as not to get sullied by the untouchables near him, and praying out loud...maybe even in a pretty audible voice. And the prayer starts off with gratitude, but that's about it. The rest of it contains little more than a laundry list of all the good things the Pharisee does, nothing of what God does. So, it's an arrogant religious leader...what else is new?

Jesus emphasizes that he is doing all of the right actions, but the tax collector goes home justified. So what? Well, the tax collector, as Jesus' audience would have known, was spending his days taking money from the Israelites for the Roman authorities. He was actively supporting the occupiers! And on top of all of that, he had to, by the nature of the job, come into contact with all kinds of people and therefore, most certainly to the Pharisee, was unclean. So, the tax collector had done all of his sinning on the outside, but the Pharisee waited until he got to church.

The dangerous thing, the sinful thing, is that the Pharisee thinks that he is remarkable. He is not like the others. He believes the illusion that he can be the arbiter of other people's lives because his is so different from theirs. His disapproval for others is proportionate to his belief that what he has accomplished, he has accomplished. He thinks this is self-knowledge, but it is really just self-absorption and that isn't the same thing. Without confession, without looking at our darker sides, we cannot be whole. And not being whole is the landscape of sin.

Sin, like justification, is a hard term in Greek. But I recently read the most satisfying translation I have read to date. The Jesus Seminar scholars are now choosing in most places to translate the word hamartia in its more mystical sense as "the corrupting seduction of power." And that's how I mean it too. Hamartia is a force that enters human history within us and obstructs our storyline. And it almost always has to do with power. Think about it this way: Pride is a good thing until it becomes powerful. Sex is a good thing until it too becomes about power. Money + power = a great Petri dish for sin.

The tax collector comes to God knowing his embrace of power, aware of his sin. The Pharisee waits until he gets to the temple to display his sin. See, the Pharisee has got a good program. He fasts, he tithes, he does all the right stuff and if other people would just get with the program, then things would be fine. As soon as you begin down that road, especially when people don't sign on to your program

it is an easy step to start seeing "us and them". And the spreading of any "Good News" becomes practically impossible because you're just full of resentment. Perhaps if the Pharisee had put as much energy into understanding his neighbor's pain as he put into trying to convince God he wasn't like "that guy" then something might have been transformed. Maybe he would know God beyond just a passive applauding audience for his colorless list of accomplishments.

The tax collector, however, goes home a step closer to God. Odd thing that in life the times we grow closer to God are often the times in which we are most at our wits' end, when we are most willing to let down our guard, be vulnerable and to confess our sins...to notice the ways that we have mishandled power.

So I've changed my mind again. I think this parable is about reverence. It is about the idea that even the power we wield in very small spheres of influence is just as susceptible to abuse as the power a General of a large army holds...so we must have respect for it, reverent of its power to tempt us to evil things. It is about that reverence leading us to a place where we are always on guard about our power...mistrusting its intentions, guarding ourselves from its temptations and seeking to divest ourselves of it as often as possible, lest it find its way into our hearts...a paraphrase of what John Wesley once said about money. It is challenging our comfortable place where, especially in the so-called progressive church, we think that our rationality is the source of all things, that knowledge is redemptive or that we can solve any issue with just the right information. It is about the difference between an attitude that all things are because of us, belong to us and depend on us versus an attitude of "smallness"...or at least the recognition of something bigger than us, something that is beyond our control or transcends our understanding. Because honestly, when we arrive at that place, whether by prayer or service or the simple act of standing next to an ancient oak tree aware of the fact that we had absolutely nothing to do with it...however we arrive at that place we are as close to God as we can get. Hey...that would have been a good title.