

Sermon
Opening Worship
Fall Meeting of Board of Pensions
October 25, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 31:31-34

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 18:9–14

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 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.”

Teaching Moment

Jesus is sitting somewhere on the road to Jerusalem, surrounded by the disciples and his other followers. We have no CNN video to record it, but I imagine that there was a question or two about who deserves salvation. Now, we know what is behind this scene: The **Pharisees** spent most of their time trying their best to keep the laws of Moses. They went to great pains to do this. We know that they were influential and probably held significant wealth. Throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees seem **self-possessed**: They are fortunate that they are able to keep all of these laws and rules, unlike the poor who have little time for the cleansing rituals prescribed by the law, along with a lot of other requirements. And, we often forget that the poor worked long hours six days each week and barely got by financially. So, as Professor Sean Berg at Princeton Theological Seminary often states, the Pharisees would fit right in at any “tall steeple” church, especially if it was Episcopalian or **Presbyterian**. So, for those out there who are cradle Christians, securely employed, and active in your congregation- you would fit the modern version of a Pharisee.

Remarkably, the other individual noted by Jesus is the **tax collector**. These men worked for the government, which meant that they answered to the authority of **Rome**. They had no salary: only the amount which they created for themselves. To do this, they collected an amount from each individual that was more than the **allotment required** by the government. This veritable “shakedown” of the public was somewhere between the power of the Internal Revenue Service and the local powerbroker in town, who offers protection for you and your business through regular payments for his “protection.”

Well, here are these two in the temple, offering up a prayer. The well-to-do, socially prominent, **religiously correct** Pharisee is making a public display. He even compares and contrasts himself to the obviously sinful **reject from society**, the tax collector, as of to say: “Surely, THAT individual is unworthy for God to even pay attention.” At least, that has been my takeaway from this parable since I was in elementary school. But, **Jesus** has had many encounters with the **Pharisees**. Prior to these verses, Jesus has pointed out the many shortcomings of this category, or class, of individuals in Jewish and Roman society in Palestine.

The problem for you and me is that it is easy for us to identify with the Pharisee, possibly thinking of this class of persons as role models. Many of us faithful Presbyterians can become **complacent** and **self-absorbed**, just like these Pharisee before Jesus and the disciples. On the other hand, we have the **tax collector**. His prayer asks God for **mercy**. He identifies himself as a **sinner**. Likely, if he is good at his profession he is well off financially. But, he is punished continually, since he lacks respect among the people around him. My understanding of his prayer is that his position, his power, his **influence**, his **assets** bring no satisfaction, **no comfort**, and no rest for his inner being. He is **spiritually corrupt** and aching **repentant** at this moment. As a result, he offers himself in truth and **humility** to God. His stark assessment makes quite a **contrast** to the pompous, self-absorbed Pharisee.

Jesus told those surrounding him that day that the repentant **tax collector**, the most **despised person** around them, was **justified**. Indeed, the tax collector was better served in his time in the **temple** than the Pharisee. Jesus pointed out that **humility** trumped arrogance. **Sincerity** triumphed over ostentation. **Honesty** and true **repentance** before God brought **justification**. That was the **Teaching Moment** in these last days before the arrest, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Today, most of us gathered for this meeting of the Board of Pensions are **fully engaged** in our faith and in our communities of faith. As directors of the BOP, we know that you are dedicated to your work: what you offer of your **time and talents** in the service of the church of Jesus Christ. Like the tax collector, you are in touch with the truly important, real and gritty work that is required for God’s kingdom. And, much like that day in the temple the Risen Christ remains before us, advising us, **leading** us, **calling** you and me to do good, to **work for justice**, and to bring about the kingdom of God through the activity of **God’s Spirit** and God’s claim on our lives and on **our living**.

Because of the **Risen Christ**, God knows that we work for the kingdom when we offer **witness to the world** in our daily routine, in the sincerity of **our worship**, and in our calling and **ministry**. All this comes from the **grace and mercy** of God and the abiding **peace** that we have in God through Jesus Christ, whom we know as **Lord and Savior**.

Stan Reid © 2019