

Luke 18:9-14 Pastor Bill Uetrict 10/24/16 22 Pentecost

This past week I participated in a gathering of some clergy and other leaders in the church. It was a good gathering. I very much appreciated the speaker for the event, John Bell, a well-known thinker and song writer. But I have to admit this to you. Sometimes I leave events like these not simply gladdened but also frustrated and perturbed. This time I left feeling . . . frustrated *and* justified at the same time. I didn't say it directly to my colleagues, but I sure thought it about some of them: "if only you would do things like I do them. I work hard. I get up early. I show up on time. I exercise have exercised for a long time. I am energetic. I am passionate. I get my work done. I actually do what I say that I am going to do. I spend lots of time with people. I study. I prepare. I...I...I really do. I'm not faking it. I'm not a hypocrite. I don't say one thing and do another. My colleagues, you, on the other hand, well... I left that meeting, as I have left other such meetings, feeling justified. At least I am not like *them*.

So I came back from the meeting and then was force to confront the Biblical texts for the coming weekend. The first lesson was very compelling. I am intrigued by the honesty of Biblical writers in their relationship with God. Jeremiah seems to be saying, "All right, God. We are messed up. We worship false gods. But don't make yourself scarce, nonetheless. Don't act like a tourist! This is your land and your people. Be our God, as you promised to be." I like that kind of honesty. I felt a sermon in development. I mean, how seldom are we that honest with God? How frank are we with God in asking God not simply to forgive us but to come through, to be God, to be present, to respond to the messes of the world? Not very often. The reading seemed

compelling, even if it is dark, depressing, and dreary. Sometimes I like dark, depressing, and dreary.

Then I glanced at Second Timothy. I must admit: it's not my favorite book. And Paul's defense of his ministry, his claim that he has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith is nice, but a bit pretentious in my view. He sounds like the kind of people who get frustrated with other people, especially colleague-types, because they are just not like him. I couldn't relate to that, so I turned to the gospel reading for the weekend.

"Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." This isn't starting out on such a good note. I'm not sure I like this one.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector," one a good guy and one bad buy, one clearly a righteous person and one clearly an unrighteous person. The good guy, standing by himself . . . standing by himself, standing by *himself* . . . prayed like this: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, listless clergy, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. You know me. I do the right stuff. I fast not just once but twice a week. I give ten percent of all of my income, not just what I produce, but everything I own."

"But the tax collector, standing far off . . . standing far off . . . standing *far off*, would not even look up to heaven; he was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'" You know, I really don't think I like this one!

Unfortunately, we have a bad view of the Pharisees. We have fully received the New Testament's exaggerated picture of them and have seen them as religious hypocrites. To say today that someone is

acting like a Pharisee is to say that they are acting hypocritical. Well, that's a bad portrait of the Pharisees. In many ways, the Pharisees were the good guys. The Pharisees were responsible for making sure that the prophetic books like Isaiah and Micah were included in the Old Testament. They made sure that the books that deal with the care of the poor and the underdog, justice for the neighbor and the foreigner were the scriptures that the Jews heard. They were known for their inclusion of all kinds of people. And for the most part, they were not hypocritical. They did what they said they were going to do. The Pharisee praying in the temple more than likely did give away ten percent of his income. Let's face it: the church could use more people like him!

The Pharisees were the good guys. They did their jobs. They showed up early. They worked hard. They exercised. They prepared. They probably even mowed their lawns, raked their leaves, and cleaned up the messes their dogs made. Yet Jesus, as he is reflecting on the prayers offered by the Pharisee and the tax collector, tells us that it was the tax collector who left the temple on good terms with God. The Pharisee, the guy who probably did all the right things, went home on bad terms with God.

I'm feeling quite uncomfortable. What do you want, God, if it is not for us to do the right things, good things? That's what religion is all about, isn't it? Isn't religion about doing right and being right?

No, it's not, Jesus seems to be saying. When it is—this is a tangential but significant point--we find ourselves bolstering ourselves by disparaging others. This has been on display in this culture in such graphic forms lately. Maybe if I tear you down, tell you how wrong you are, call you names, dismiss you with big, ugly terms, global language,

some people like to call it, then I can elevate myself. Interestingly enough, the psychologists are telling us that such attempts are sometimes rooted in a sense of our inadequacy. Maybe if I can make you look bad, I will feel better about myself and look better. But no matter what our motives, the need to disparage others to bolster our own identity is being taken on by Jesus today. He is taking on how religion is often defined by human beings.

Robert Farar Capon says that today's gospel story, like all of Jesus' parables, "should carry a warning which [claims] 'this will be hazardous to all your previous opinions about how religion and God work.' Jesus' parables are designed to outrage the hearers." Well, I am feeling outraged. I mean, I really do get up early, don't I? I do work really hard, don't I? Harder than most, right?

Capon says: "The Pharisee's problem is not that he is showing off. It is that he really believes that his stack of good deeds is enough to save the world." Whoa! Is that what I believe? My stack of good deeds is enough to save the world, enough to save the clergy, the church, enough to save my community, enough to save my home? Oh, Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy on me!

Religious thinker Thomas Driver (**Patterns of Grace**) tells a story about a time when he and his wife were involved in group therapy for their marriage. Frankly, Tom was being quite a pistol on this particular day in the group situation. He was being controlling, refusing to see his wife's perspective. Driver himself said that it was clear that he was standing in his own way, that "he would not give himself up."

"What can we do? I don't know what to do," Betty Fuller, the leader of the workshop said.

"Let him stand on a table," someone said. And they did let him.

“Not high enough,” said Betty. So they got a chair and put it on top of the table, and invited him to go up. And he did. And from that place he surveyed the room.

“Well,” said Betty, “Now that you’re up there, tell us what is wrong with each one of us.”

He started at his left and moved clockwise. For every person in the room he had a word. One was too this, another too that. He judged each in turn, and in my favorite part of the story, told each one what to do in order to be saved.

“How does that feel?” Betty asked.

“Fine,” he answered. And it did.

“Would you like to come down?” queried Betty.

“Yes,” Tom said.

“Then fall backward,” she said.

Reluctantly, he agreed. And Driver said, “He fell through water. He was diving backward. It might have been a thousand feet. The air turned to water as he sank. He fell into the waiting arms of people. Arms cushioned his fall, received his weight, and held [him].” And then real water appeared, as streams of water flowed down his cheeks.

A death happened that day. Tom died . . . to himself. He reentered the waters of baptism. He was taken not to religion as it is often defined, but into the world of Jesus. He died with Jesus, and he also was raised again. He was held in the arms of mercy.

The world will not be saved by my good deeds. The church will not be saved by my good deeds. Your family will not be saved by your good deeds. That is to say, life is not fundamentally about your or my stack of good deeds. It is time to come off of the chair that is sitting on the table and fall into the arms of mercy. Life is fundamentally about

the mercy of God. The tax collector got that. 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. This man went back to his house on good terms with God.

“God, be merciful!” That is the right prayer for all of us. And we can pray it because God **is** merciful, God **is** compassionate, God **is** gracious. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the sure signs of that.

Tom, fall off that table. Bill, get off your high horse. It’s not about being right. It’s not about better than others. It’s not about a stack of good deeds. It’s about the mercy of God.