



“Open”

Luke 14:9-14

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The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

As I was doing research to prepare for today’s sermon...I came across a magazine article that...well, it set me on edge a bit.

The article is by a now retired professor of church history named Roberta Bondi...and it’s about our Lectionary Gospel text from Luke...which is pretty commonly known as the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

In the article, Ms. Bondi tells a story from early in her career...when she was a seminarian...and working with teenagers at a church. This sounded pretty relevant to what is going on in my career...since I too am still in seminary and am working with our teens. And so it piqued my interest.

She writes about a time when she was asked to teach a class at her church on this same parable from Luke. And apparently the class didn’t go so well. In fact, she says the class became chaos. Students had visceral...even nasty...reactions to the parable...and she lost control of the class. In her own words, it was “a disaster.”

And then she adds the following: “I can’t remember much of what I answered that day...What I do remember is that the class complained about me the next day...and I ended up never wanting to work in a church again.”

Now, as I begin my first sermon since starting as Assistant Minister...and as we prepare to delve into this very same parable...let me just say this: I’m hoping for a better result.

The interesting thing about this parable is that, at first glance, it doesn’t seem so potentially controversial.

The punchline: “The humble shall be exalted...and the exalted shall be humbled.” This really doesn’t sound all that contentious.

But what I found out as I started to think more deeply about this story, was that it really does prompt strong reactions...reactions not just to the message...but especially...reactions to the characters.

And so let’s start by looking at these two very different characters...the Pharisee and the tax collector.

The Pharisees were very much part of the religious elite in ancient Israel. They were among the most educated and devout of the Jewish people...highly respected. In fact, Paul was a Pharisee.

But Luke...like the other Gospels...depicts Jesus as periodically coming into conflict with the Pharisees...typically accusing them and other leaders of hypocrisy.

If I had to summarize Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees...it would be that they can get so caught up in their religious practices that they forget the basics of compassion. And so when we encounter the Pharisee in our story, we kind of expect something negative...our antennae are up.

And then there is the tax collector. Although, come April 15, many of us might fear the IRS...these ancient tax collectors...they were a wholly different matter.

This was a profession that was pretty much akin to carpetbagger...or maybe bounty hunter. These guys made a living...and a pretty good one...as independent contractors...collecting taxes from an already impoverished people...apparently taking a return off the top.

In a sense they combined the worst of two worlds...on the one hand, scamming common Jewish folks...as well as other people...and on the other hand...doing the bidding for the hated Roman overlords.

And so this tax collector is unlikely to be a sympathetic character.

The story opens by letting us know that this parable is addressed to people "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt"...a description that we quickly learn fits the Pharisee.

This becomes clear from the way the Pharisee prays...saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like the other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

And then the Pharisee lists his religious accomplishments, saying, "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

By standards of the day...these are solid religious practices...signs of real devotion to God. But, having already been cued up by that opening statement, we can't help but see the Pharisee's prayer as being defensive and self-righteous...and even worse, disdainful of others.

And then the parable turns to the tax collector. This guy who is supposed to be so awful...he shows contrite humility to the point of self-flagellation.

We are told that he "would not even look to heaven"...and that..."he was beating his breast and saying 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'" Basically, this poor guy seems almost in tears...begging for mercy.

And Jesus is quite explicit about who is right and who is wrong in his story...about who is the winner and who is the loser...at least in God's eyes.

We learn that the tax collector goes home "justified" while the Pharisee does not. This is good news for the tax collector...he is justified...which, here, essentially means being in right relationship with God...perhaps akin to redemption.

And as for the Pharisee...he is out of sync with God...Jesus seems to pretty clearly be saying that God did not approve of his prayer.

And so the message seems pretty straightforward...self-righteous disdain for others is a recipe for being out of sync with God...humility is the way to get back in sync.

But our reaction to the characters is far more complicated. If you are like I am, you react in lots of different ways.

To begin with...it's probably a given that we all disapprove of the Pharisee's self-righteousness and scorn of others. At the same time, it's also probably a given that we are happy to see the tax collector humbly turn toward God in his confession of sin and plea for forgiveness.

And yet, at the same time, you may also have underlying concerns...questions about how God treats both men...like whether the Pharisee is being treated too harshly...or why the tax collector is getting such an easy pass from God.

And that's exactly what our beleaguered friend, Ms. Bondi, encountered in her chaotic class.

After reading the scripture she was bombarded with aggressive questions about the story: "What do you mean, 'one went home justified and the other did not?'" or "Didn't the Pharisee do all those good things? Are you telling us they don't count for anything with God?" And about the tax collector, she's asked: "Did I hear you say God doesn't judge sin?"

These all seem like great questions to me. They dig at the types of issues we all wrestle with as we dutifully try to do the right thing in our lives. Is God really that willing to disregard the good stuff we've done...and overlook the bad stuff we've done? Don't our faith or religious practices count for something?

So yes, these are all great questions...and it seems to me that this scripture is actually prompting us to ask these kinds of challenging questions.

And yet I think there is more to the parable than simply prompting questions...I think that there is something else going on...something subtle that is easy to miss.

I think this story is actually doing something to us...maybe even doing something inside us.

What I'm saying is that this story not only *tells* us that self-righteousness and disdain are bad...but I think it also tries *to prove that we capable of that kind of feeling*...and it does this by precipitating that very feeling in us...at least that's what I noticed about myself.

My natural reaction is to dismiss the Pharisee as doing something I would never do. I don't say or pray this sort of stuff about other people. That's outrageous.

And yet, that's precisely what I was doing. I found myself doing exactly what the Pharisee was doing.

And haven't we all from time to time been thankful to God that we aren't like some other person or type of person who we perceive as beneath us...less honorable than we are. This text reminded me that we all probably have this kind of tendency...I know I do.

And for me, that is the genius of this parable. Jesus is not only *telling* us that disdainful self-righteousness is bad news...but he is also *showing* us that we have the very same tendency.

And so when we go back to the very first line of the parable...where we are told that Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt"...isn't he really addressing the story to us?

And maybe this explains why the class gave Ms. Bondi such a hard time. No one likes to be told...however subtly...that they are flawed.

But, of course, there is good news here too...and this time it's not so subtle. In fact, Jesus makes the point crystal clear...and it's the central message of Christianity. Through our contrition and repentance we are forgiven by God.

In fact, this is exactly what we do here every Sunday. We begin our service with a confession of sin. We begin by humbly acknowledging that we can do better...and by so doing, we put ourselves in right relationship with God.

And so yes, we are all flawed...whether we have issues like the Pharisee...or the tax collector...or if we have other issues...and we all do. But the good news is...God stands ready to embrace us.

A number of years ago...I was having the first of what would become regular meetings with an important mentor in my life. At that point, I was really wrestling with Scripture.

You see...I am a born skeptic. I like to take devil's advocate positions...I like to challenge things. And at that point, skepticism was upfront and center as I read the Bible...perhaps a surprising admission from your new Assistant Minister.

And at that first meeting, I told my mentor that I was having difficulty with large parts of the Bible...that I was having trouble finding the kind of relevance to my life that others seem to find. What I was basically doing was questioning if these parts had lost their relevance.

And my mentor...he sat there calmly and said something like the following...in the nicest sort of way, he said: "Who do you think you are?" And then he proceeded to ask how I could so easily dismiss...look down on...texts that have changed literally billions of lives for thousands of years?

What he was essentially doing was pointing out the absurdity...that someone who prides himself on being open-minded...had become closed-minded about the Bible.

Well, I got to thinking...and pretty quickly concluded that I was, in fact, being closed-minded...even judgmental...that I wasn't really being who I professed to be.

Without belaboring the story, let me just say this. That moment was an amazing turning point in my life. It began the process of allowing me to see the Bible with more open eyes...to, in a sense, put down my guard when I read the Bible...and in the process, re-opening me to the world of the Bible.

For this I am most thankful.

It's important to add that I wasn't being told to drop my skepticism. To the contrary, throughout this growing process...it's been clear that skepticism...asking questions...that this is a crucial part of reading the Bible.

In fact, I see this so vividly in my confirmation class. These kids are loaded with such great questions. Their minds are so alive. And my hope for this class...really for all of us...is that we keep those questions coming.

And my other hope is that we keep an open mind...because we never know where we might learn something...maybe even from the Bible. I certainly did...and I'll never be the same again.

And so that brings us back to our parable for this morning. I see this story from Luke as a perfect example of the fact that there is so much going on in Scripture...and that much can be missed if we aren't open to it.

This text doesn't tell us not to question it. In fact it causes us to question it. It causes us to take sides. It forces us to ask ourselves questions like...who we identify with...and who gets under our skin.

And in the process...it prompts us to take stock of ourselves...helping us to see that...not only are we not perfect...but that we don't have to be.

This is what The Word of God is telling us...this morning...and every morning. This is how The Word of God changes lives. Amen.