

Getting All the Notes Right

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on February 6, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.¹¹The 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.¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.¹³But 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!¹⁴I 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."

(Luke 18:9-14, NRSV)

While I don't have too many regrets in my life, one of them is that I never learned to play the piano. It's true that I never showed any interest in taking up lessons while I was growing up. And neither of my parents are particularly musical, so short of me *asking* for lessons, it would never have occurred to them to push me into them.

But having a piano come with the church manse in my first church out of seminary, I thought I'd try to learn, though I didn't seek out a teacher. I suppose I was inspired by the example of my paternal grandmother. She didn't read music at all, but she had an uncommon ear for it and taught herself to play many things that she heard. She played with passion, freedom, and joy. She played the most beautiful versions of "How Great Thou Art", "Jesus Loves Me", and "Amazing Grace" that I've ever heard, each and all with her own skillful flourishes and with deep heart.

So, inspired by these cherished memories of hearing her play, I tried to teach myself. It started out fine. I quickly got a sense of how the keys sounded, and so then tried to pluck out familiar sacred music ... like "Crown Him with Many Crowns" or "Take My Life and Let it Be" or the Auburn Fight Song ... And I did get more confident in my plucking. Eventually, I even became proud of myself and of how much I had learned on my own. But that's as far as it ever got. I was always so conscious of trying to get each and every note right, that it always sounded forced ... Never anything like my grandmother who *did* get the notes right, but *also* did something far greater – *make music*.

As we continue our parables series this morning, and turn to our gospel passage for this morning, we hear a parable with some familiar tropes: the "bad" guy as a self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisee; and the "good" guy as someone who wasn't normally thought of that way ... a hated tax collector here, or a Samaritan there, or a "sinful woman" elsewhere.

This seems to be Jesus' favorite way of setting up a story – something we might expect from one whose motto was "The first shall be last, and the last, first." We know that for Jesus'

original hearers these good guy / bad guy identifications would have been shocking. For you see, the Pharisees were regarded with the deepest respect and honor by ordinary people, as examples to be followed, as voices to be heard. And the tax collectors? They were seen as traitors to their own people and as collaborators with the Romans. For Jesus to make a Pharisee an example of what *not* to do would have been widely seen as disrespectful at best. For him to make a tax collector an exemplar of the good would have been seen as absurd.

What a difference 2000 years can make! Today, of course, we know better, because *we* know that salvation doesn't come by keeping rules and impressing God with our righteousness, but comes wholly by God's grace. This is the great lesson of the Protestant Reformation. *We* know that we're supposed to boo the Pharisee. For that matter, the parable even opens by telling us exactly why it's being told and then proceeds with a figure so caricatured that we can't *not* get the point ... self-righteousness is bad, humility is good ... rule-keeping won't get you God's approval, which can only be received as a gift.

Only, the joke's on us. Like so many of Jesus' parables, we know the one we're *supposed* to emulate, and yet may find – if we're honest – that we have far more in common with the other.

With whom do *you* identify more?

- ❖ The wealthy tax collector, who has collaborated in the oppression of his own people and has profited considerably from it – but who now is so stricken in conscience that he beats his breast, crying out, “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner”?
- ❖ Or is it the respectable, middle-class Pharisee who tries so hard to do the right thing, to keep the rules ... but who also can't help noticing that *he* tries a lot harder than some *other* people! And something about that fact both irritates him *and* makes him a little proud.

Which of these sounds more like you? Speaking for myself, it's not even close. I suspect that it isn't for you either.

It's clear that an uncritical reading of the gospels over the centuries has yielded a common-sense Christian view of the Pharisees as exemplifying an entirely bad approach to the religious life – serving up “works-righteousness,” as the Protestant reformers would call it. This view has been pervasive – so much in fact that if you look up the word “Pharisee” in the dictionary, you would soon find an entry going to the heart of the matter: a word to describe a hypocritical, self-righteous person.

For a few reasons – not the least of which is that I resemble the Pharisee much more than the tax collector – I don't want to see the Pharisee only as a villain. The parable was shocking in the first place because of the widespread respect that the masses had for such a person. A young man would become a Pharisee, not because he wanted to show off his superiority, but because he wanted to please God ... he wanted to be faithful to God's commandments ... he wanted to

be an example to others ... he wanted to do good things ... he wanted, so to speak, to get all the notes right.

One of my all-time favorite MASH episodes was from season eight in which a young man named David is brought in to the 4077th having suffered irreparable damage to one of his hands. He despairs and expresses his deep anger at – pardon the expression – the hand that life is dealing him. Dr. Winchester (that would be “Dr. Charles Emerson Winchester III”!) is treating him and he doesn’t understand the intensity of his patient’s anger, responding in effect, “But it’s only your hand. You’re so fortunate that it wasn’t something more serious, like an arm or a leg – or your life.” The young man then reveals that his hands *are* his life – for he is a concert pianist.

This revelation awakens a deep compassion in the usually smug Winchester, and he makes it his mission to show the young man that his musical career is not over. He tracks down some piano scores that can be played one-handed – including Maurice Ravel's famous “Piano Concerto for the Left Hand” – and makes a point of skipping a party that the rest of the unit is having so that he may be with the young man as he gives him the scores.

In his pain, David rebuffs the kindness at first. But Winchester won’t let go. “Don't you see? Your hand may be stilled, but your gift cannot be silenced if you refuse to let it be ... I have hands, David. Hands that can make a scalpel sing. But more than anything in my life I wanted to play ... *I can play the notes, but I cannot make the music.* You have performed Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Chopin. Even if you never do so again, you've already known a joy that I will never know as long as I live. Because the true gift is in your head and in your heart and in your soul.”

Thinking back on that great episode, I can’t help but remember my ill-fated attempt at piano. And when I do that, the Pharisee seems less a villain and more like a familiar companion. His failure is *not* that he desperately wants to do all the right things, to get all the notes right, as if desiring to do all that is somehow wrong. And no doubt he can and does get so much right. *It is as though he can play the notes, but he cannot make the music.* He can never quite get *himself* out of the way. *He is his own problem.* He is so focused on the rightness of each note that he can never quite give himself over to the music and let joy and freedom flow from his heart.

Perhaps on some deep level he *knows* he isn’t “making music.” Perhaps in his obsession with getting all the notes right, he feels empty, and so seeks to fill the emptiness by working still harder and harder to get it all right, or to stoke it with the empty satisfaction of feeling superior to another.

In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector brings nothing to the table but his own helplessness and desperation. Most likely, he had never even tried to pluck out the notes of a godly life. But then something happens, and he becomes convicted of the gross injustice of his livelihood. He comes to see himself for what he has become. He comes to know that he is utterly helpless, unable in himself to make things right. In fear and trembling, he does the only thing he has left to do – to surrender all to the mercy of God. And in this way, he is so much

closer to the Kingdom than our would-be righteous friend, for he does the one thing the Pharisee is *unable* to do – the only thing that matters in the end – to let it all go and to be one with the music of the Spirit.

In this new year, as we continue to deal with the challenge of COVID-19 but also see a light at the end of the tunnel, we may be very aware of the importance of our efforts as a congregation over the next few months.

We dare to believe that we are emerging from a long, dark night, into the dawn of new and better days, and as such, we want to do things right. We rightly seek to do all that we can to be faithful to our calling. We seek the good of this church and are committed to it being effective in ministry and a blessing to the larger Athens community.

But we seek these things, it is critical that we move forward not with a spirit of anxiety, but with a spirit of freedom and celebration, for we know that the future we seek is *God's* future. It is a future that is not finally in our hands, and it never was. And *that* is good news.

In this simple act of letting go is *liberation*. Freed from the tyranny of results, freed from the lure of comparing ourselves to others, freed from the fear of not getting everything right, we can give ourselves over in trust to the flow of the Spirit. And that is what I believe will happen among us – even in these days which may still feel so uncertain. I see a congregation that is deeply grateful for all that God has done among us – and for all that God is *about to do*.

In this time, may we live more and more into the freedom of giving ourselves away ... of getting in the flow of what the Spirit is doing in our midst, and allow its rhythm to catch us up – transforming our lives and our life together into a beautiful song of praise imparting new life to the world – to the glory of God! Amen.