

Giving Up the Need to be Perfect

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 3, 2024

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)

As we all know, our lives and our culture are saturated with image. Image, it seems, is everything, all the way from our politics, our media landscape, our communities, and even down into our private lives. Folks take great care to cultivate an image, of what they value, what they want others to think of them ... to project lives that are happy and ordered and "have it together."

We've always known this. Social media, of course, brings it all to the fore and gives folks an opportunity to practice all this quite explicitly, and if I may say so, sometimes rather shamelessly. Our newsfeeds are filled with posts projecting happy homes, perfect families, Godly focus, sometimes righteous proclamations on the issues of the day – all meant, consciously or unconsciously, to do much more than just convey information.

This doesn't have to be seen as always dishonest or sinister, of course, and Lord knows we could all use some happy thoughts and positive images in our lives. But there's also a piece of it that's like the writing of fiction – perhaps quite inspiring and uplifting, and sometimes based on reality, but a *construction* nonetheless. Nobody's life, including mine, is quite as uncomplicated – quite as perfect – as we may sometimes encourage others to think.

As we turn to our scripture text for this morning, we hear a parable that speaks to this human issue we have with the images we project, the images we promote to ourselves. The story offers us some familiar New Testament tropes: a Pharisee and a Tax Collector ... two classes of people that often appear in the gospels ... the Pharisee as the hyper-observant person dedicated to all the niceties of Jewish religious law and outwardly modeling its central place in life ... the tax collector as the worst of sinners, a collaborator with the hated Roman oppressors and a traitor to his own people.

Of course, these two classes of people also represent "types" which are vehicles for the gospels' pattern of reversing ordinary perceptions ... the super-religious, Law-loving guy as self-

righteous, hypocritical ... and the despised tax collector, like a hated Samaritan or “sinful woman” elsewhere, as the “good” character, the hero of the story.

This seems to be one of Jesus’ favorite ways of setting up a parable – something we might expect from one whose motto was “The first shall be last, and the last, first.” Jesus thrived on turning the tables of expectations, and we know that for his original hearers these good guy / bad guy identifications would have been shocking.

You see, the Pharisees were regarded with the deepest respect and honor by ordinary people, as examples to be followed. And the tax collectors? They were seen as the worst of the worst. For Jesus to make a Pharisee an example of how *not* to be, 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 isn’t about 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 ... hypocrisy, self-righteousness, putting on a show is bad ... deep humility and repentance is good.

Only, *the joke’s on us*, and Jesus knows it. Like so many of his parables, we *know* the one we’re *supposed* to boo and the one we’re supposed to cheer, and yet may find – if we’re honest – that we have far more in common with the first.

With whom do *you* identify more?

- ❖ Is it the respectable, middle-class Pharisee who really does value keeping the rules, but also, just as importantly, keeping up appearances ... presenting a righteous front ...
- ❖ Or is it the 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, casting all decorum aside, crying out, not caring who hears it, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”?

Which of these two is closer to home? 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 self-righteous, hypocritical person.

But 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 just to show off his superiority, but because he wanted to please God ... he wanted to be faithful to God's commandments ... he wanted to do good things ... *to set a good example* ... even if in truth, he had to fudge around a bit with the facts.

And so, it's here, when I remember my own life, that the Pharisee seems less a villain and more like a familiar companion. He wants to get it all right, and deeply cares about his image. He cares how he appears, and for that reason, can never quite get himself out of the way. He is so focused on image that he can never quite give himself over to something more than *image*, and let real authenticity and joy and freedom flow from his heart. He can't quite come to admit to himself just how much he's faking it.

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 live out or present the front 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, and he knows 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 – surrender all decorum and appearances, and fall on his knees and cry out for the mercy of God. In this way, he is so much closer to the Kingdom than our Pharisee 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 surrender image for something real.

I think this parable teaches us something about giving up our need to be perfect, and our need to make our lives *appear* perfect, putting up a front that we have it all together. The parable is not about giving up our desire to obey God, and still less about relinquishing our responsibility to serve as good examples for others. None of that is at issue in the story. The Pharisee is not judged for any desire he might have to project a way of life worthy of emulation – he is judged for projecting, as his own, a perfection he doesn't (and can't) live up to, and then on the basis of that projection, casting others as inferior to himself.

Yes, this parable calls us to account ... the Pharisee in us can be strong. But it is also good news – to both the Pharisee in us who still pretends and to the Tax Collector in us who knows that any such front is a lie:

- It's good news to the Pharisee within because there *is* another way beyond dishonesty and lying to ourselves and others,
- And yes, it's good news to the Tax Collector within, to that one whose life isn't together and has no appearance of being together.

The good news of God's grace can free us from our need that our lives be perfect, or appear so. It can free us from judging others, especially those not as good at hiding the truth as we are. And it is an invitation home for all those who *know* their lives are a mess ... who could only *wish* they had a stable home, or a happy marriage, or well-adjusted kids, or relatives who weren't weird, or lives without well-protected secrets.

It is this good news of grace that we celebrate at the Table of the Lord. You all may recall that in the opening invitation to the Table, I have for some time now made a point to say that our celebration here is a celebration for *all*, open to anyone and everyone who hears the call of Christ and wants to come:

*This is not my table. This is not our church's table.
This is not a Presbyterian table, or an American table,
or a table reserved only for the wealthy or the well-connected.
This table is reserved for sinners, for the poor,
for those who are cast out, for all who hunger and thirst,*

This same message, even more powerfully expressed, is also on a painted canvas now in my office. I found it about two years ago at a nearby Baptist church's arts and crafts market, and I believe that it shines – as well as anything I've ever seen – with the open heart and open arms of Christ, which are able to embrace the prodigal and set free anyone who longs for freedom:

If you are searching, saved, black, brown, white, gay, straight, sure, unsure, older, younger, peace-filled, pain-filled, able-bodied, or differently-abled ... No matter how many moms or dads or divorces or kids or chromosomes or failures or successes or questions you have ... No matter your gender or status or where you are from, know that you are welcome here.

No matter who you are, or what you have done, or the life you live, or the mess you're ashamed of ... know that you *are* welcome here, for this table belongs to Jesus Christ, and he is the one who invites you – to the glory of God! Amen.