

Year C Proper 30 Lord Give Me the Grace to Change Myself Luke 18 vv9 to 14

This story actually seems pretty straightforward. The righteous Pharisee looks with contempt upon the tax collector, who is a self-proclaimed unworthy sinner, and declares, “Thank God I’m not like him,” and we are not to be like the Pharisee.

However, that sets us up to fall into the same trap. As soon as we say, “Thank God I’m not like the Pharisee” – or whatever precise wording you choose to use – we have done the same thing of judging others according to ourselves. Most of us are, in reality, quite good at acknowledging that we are sinners although we don’t stand outside the church door, beating our breasts and crying out to God for mercy. Despite this acknowledgement that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we still persist in being pretty darn “judgey”. We all judge others. There is most definitely a little bit of the Pharisee and a little bit of the tax collector in all of us.

But there is more to understanding this parable. Luke is trying to reveal to us a deep-rooted problem that exists in our broken world – a problem Jesus addressed head on, over and over.

Let’s first realize that everything the Pharisee says is true. He fasts twice each week and he gives a tenth of his income. We find him today at the Temple, praying. By all accounts, this Pharisee is righteous and, at the end of our story, he is still righteous. So, what’s the problem?

The problem is, apparently, that he has said, “Thank God I’m not like that sinner.” Before we judge him too quickly on this, however, let’s think about those words. Perhaps we have never said, “Thank God I’m not like other people” but have we

ever said something along the lines of “There by the grace of God go I”? That is being thankful that we have what we have and we are thankful that we are not in the position of the other person. That part is okay but do we realize what we have implied? There by the grace of God go I. We have God’s grace...yes, we do...but we have just very strongly implied that the person “down on her luck”, so to speak, does not have the grace of God. God’s grace means the gifts that God freely gives to us without us earning them or deserving them...the biggest gift being God’s love and life in God’s kingdom. That is given to everyone – God’s grace is with the homeless person. God’s grace is with the drug addict. The circumstances of our broken world put us where we are – not a lack of God’s grace. Sometimes popular, cliché-type sayings need to be erased from our vocabulary because they feed the deep-rooted problem that Luke is revealing through Jesus’ teachings. Again I ask, what is the problem?

The Pharisee looks on the sinner and says, “Thank God I’m not like him.” We look on the destitute or the disaster-stricken and thank God we are not in that position, believing we have God’s grace. The problem is that this feeds the popular maxim – whether or not we are even consciously aware of it – it feeds the maxim: “God helps those who help themselves.” That is NOT in the bible anywhere. That is a twisting of the good news of God’s kingdom – a kingdom available to everyone who chooses it. It is a twisting brought about by the individualistic, everyone for themselves, my faith is between me and God, sort of thinking that permeates our society. Being loving and kind and compassionate and generous to all people, especially those who are “not like us”, means swimming against the tide in our society. That’s why things like buying a cup of

coffee for the stranger in line behind you at the local Tim Horton's actually makes the news in our society...because it's *not* normal.

Perhaps you have difficulty believing that love and compassion and kindness and generosity are not normal since, here, as people of God living in God's kingdom, we learn of these things and we allow ourselves to be transformed, through prayer, and liturgy, and God's word, transformed more and more into a people living with and living as God's love.

It is okay to know we are becoming more and more Christ-like. It is okay to acknowledge that we are righteous because we have been clothed in Christ's righteousness. It is okay to be thankful for what we have. The problem is that the world's way of thinking does seep into our thinking even here. This is what we resist. We are not being transformed because we pray. God gives us access to relationship with him through Jesus and God gives us God's love when we pray. We are not being transformed because we come to church. God gives us the transformational power of his presence when we gather to experience these liturgies together. We are not being transformed because we pay attention to God's word. God gives us the insight of the Holy Spirit within us who teaches us God's truth. Shifting from thinking "I do" to "God does" is a shift in thinking that does not come naturally. It requires conscious effort because our society is all about the "self-made man", hard work will get you where you want to go.

Shifting from "I do" to "God does" is precisely what this story today tells us we must strive for. Luke writes that Jesus is telling this story to those who trust in themselves. "I fast twice a week." "I give a tenth of my income." There is no acknowledgement of God's role in these things. There is not the complete

reliance on God, knowing that all good things come from God. What we see from the Pharisee is the “God helps those who help themselves” mantra when really, “God helps” is where the saying should end. We see in the Pharisee the exaltation of self rather than the humble realization that God provides all that we have.

Luke shows to us a Pharisee and a tax collector – not because we are meant to think all Pharisees are self-righteous and all tax collectors are horrible sinners. We are shown a sinner, meant to represent all of us, who knows he is sinful and pleads to God for help because all help comes from God. We are shown a Pharisee, meant to represent all of us, who believes his actions of praying, fasting, giving money, and attending worship have contributed to his righteousness.

It is no coincidence that this story takes place at the Temple. “On the grounds of the Temple, you were always intimately aware of who you were, of what status you had, of what you could expect from God. There were, at the Temple, “insiders” and “outsiders,” and according to these rules there was no question of where the Pharisee and tax collector stood. But when Jesus dies all this changes. As the gospels report, the curtain in the Temple is torn in two (Luke 23:45), symbolically erasing all divisions of humanity before God and eliminating the barrier between us and God. That act is prefigured here, as God justifies not the one favored by Temple law, but rather the one standing outside the Temple gate, and aware only of his utter need” (David Lose, workingpreacher.org).

“When Jesus dies all this changes.” It was *supposed* to have changed anyway. Jesus death was meant to reconcile all people to each other and to God. We are now “in Christ” through our baptisms. Being “in Christ” means being one in Christ.

Being one in Christ means being equal in love and respect...erasing the boundary lines that says there is an "us" and a "them." The Temple created boundaries in spite of God's laws promoting equality and care for all things. Women were separated from men. Gentiles were separated from Jews. Cursed (those visibly deformed or sick) were separated from blessed. All this changes when Jesus dies? The Church gradually fell into the same worldly ways of thinking that propagates the "us" and "them." Heathen and saved. Women and men. Divorced or not divorced. Gay or straight. Rich and poor. The practice of having a family pew stems from the practice of the rich families having the means to purchase the better pews near the front of the church – better view, closer to the heat source – while the poor people gathered at the drafty back, far from the action, and were lucky if they had a pew to sit in at all. The hypocrisy of such a practice among the people of God who say they are one body for we all share the one bread is more than a little mind-blowing. And it certainly was not and is not the only hypocritical Christian practice.

The Church allowed the errors of the world to infiltrate their thinking and, since the church is really the people, it is the people who must resist and change this thinking...the "I do" rather than "God does" type of thinking that breeds the "us" and "them", the "we are right" – "they are wrong" type of thinking. We change this in large measure through gathering together to experience God in God's kingdom...to learn, to practice, to transform, to bring it back out into the world with us. This is being in relationship with God and, as we know from last week, prayer is our main route into closer relationship with God. "Take the trouble to pray," we heard from Mother Teresa. Prayer opens us up to God's love, prayer

changes us. We do not ask for what we want but for what God wants. Prayer is where we resist the world and where we begin to change the world.

Sufi Bayazid (a Muslim mystic) wrote:

I was a revolutionary when I was young
and all my prayer to God was
'Lord, give me the energy to
change the world.'

As I approached middle age and
realized that half my life was gone
without my changing a single soul,
I changed my prayer to 'Lord, give me the grace
to change all those who come in contact with me.
Just my family and friends, and I shall be satisfied.'

Now that I am an old man and my days
are numbered, my one prayer is,
'Lord, give me the grace to change myself.'
If I had prayed for this right from the start
I should not have wasted my life.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will
be exalted.