

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

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New Madison First Universalist Church

Theme: We need to be aware of how we place people inside and outside of our communities.

Text: The Christian Bible, Luke 18:10-14a

What do think of when you hear the word Pharisee? Evil people, hypocrites? We live embedded in a Christian culture where Pharisee has represented the worst of religious frauds. We believe them to be phonies. We get that traditional belief from texts like Matthew 23:23,24, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" NRSV

But in the first century, Pharisees were respected as pious religious followers. We need to be aware of our perspective differences with the original audience of this parable.

Verse 9, [voted black by the Jesus Seminar] *Then for those who were confident of their own moral superiority and who held everyone else in contempt, he had this parable:*

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a toll collector. "The Pharisee stood up and prayed silently as follows: "I thank you, God, that I'm not like everybody else, thieving, unjust, adulterous, and especially not like that toll collector over there. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of everything that I acquire." But the toll collector stood off by himself and didn't even dare to look up, but struck his chest, and muttered, "God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am."

Let me tell you, the second man went back home acquitted but the first one did not. ¹

This parable was voted pink by the Jesus Seminar, Jesus probably said something like this.

The parable is found only in the Gospel of Luke and follows the parable of the unjust judge. The author of Luke has coupled it with the previous parable to illustrate prayer issues.

There are three characters in this little story. The religious follower and pious man, the Pharisee, the tax collector or toll collector, the publican, recognized by all present as a sinner, and the third is the Temple. Of course we participate in the parable as an audience but we are not mentioned.

Pharisees believed that the Jewish oral tradition was as valid as the Torah. They thought the Jewish religion could be more democratic. They believed it was necessary for the law to be interpreted using common sense and rationality. It is easy to see how the Pharisees got their present image of being self-righteous from just a few Christian texts. That image of self-righteousness has been supported by preachers ever since. The idea that Christianity supersedes Judaism is supported when we selectively vilify the Pharisees. However the first century audience would not immediately assume that this Pharisee was a bad person. Indeed their first take on him would be he was probably a very devout fellow, a proper follower of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is born out in what he says in his prayer.

The publican was a Jew who worked for the bureaucracy of the hated Roman Empire. He collected taxes or possibly tolls on the road. Just working with the Romans caused him to be classed as unclean and unsuitable to even be in the temple. Chances are, he was also somewhat dishonest and cheated his fellow Jews as he collected the tolls since that was often the case with toll collectors. The common wisdom was these types of collaborators were sinners of the lowest sort.

The temple is represented here as the center for the religious community, as it was, and a place where one can avail themselves of the presence of God. It was haven from the world, a place to go and participate in the Holy. The temple required some taxes beyond those required by the Romans. The priests and their families must be taken care of, the upkeep of the temple grounds, the cost of the animals needed for sacrifice, and all the expenses that any bureaucracy requires, would be needed. The total tax burden of temple plus Rome was excruciating and often devastating to peasants, causing them to lose their land, go into debt and sell their family members and themselves into slavery. But still, despite that and most importantly, the temple was where one could come into the presence of God.

So the two men come before God to pray. The Pharisee prays in a form that is found in the Talmud. "Praised be the Lord that he did not make me heathen, for all the heathen are as nothing before Him, praised be He that He did not make me a woman, for woman is not under obligation to fulfill the law," (t. Ber. 7:18) Yes, that phrase is actually found in the Talmud. The Pharisee says, I live a good life without the sins of thievery, injustice and adultery. I am especially thankful that I am not like that poor devil over there, that tax collector, the poor fellow, everybody looks down on him. His job that he has to support his family causes him much pain. I fast twice a week and give tithes for every thing I purchase. A little explanation is in order. It was only required to fast on the Day of Atonement. All other fasts were voluntary and were considered to be a sign of piety and he did it twice a week. Tithes were required of the producers of the harvest. To pay a tithe on everything was to go way beyond any requirement and only the most pious folks practiced that kind of tithing. This man was not lying to God, that would have been futile. He was not practicing his piety before men. He was doing what was expected of a good Jew.

"There is an immediate problem. Parables are supposed to overturn one's structure of expectation and therein and thereby to threaten the security of one's established world. Such terms as Pharisee and Publican evoke no immediate visceral reaction or expectation from a modern reader. In fact, after centuries of extremely nasty and quite inaccurate polemics against the Pharisees by Christians, the former have become almost stereotyped villains rather than the revered moral leaders they were at the time of Jesus. So, our structure of expectation is not that of the original hearers of the parable, and the parable now leaves us emotionally rather cold." ²

This parable, like so many, has been in the common domain for so long that it appears with its own Christian interpretation without much effort on our part. But this is a Jewish parable told by a Jewish sage.

The publican prays as the sinner he knows himself to be. "[T]he uplifted hands were part of usual gesture in prayer; but his head was bowed and his hands were crossed upon his breast. What follows is no part of the usual attitude in prayer; it is an expression of despair. The man smites upon his heart, wholly forgetting where he is, overwhelmed by the bitter sense of his distance from God. He and his family are in a hopeless position, since for him repentance involves, not only the abandonment of his sinful way of life, i.e. of his calling, but also the restitution of his fraudulent gains plus an added fifth. How can he know everyone with whom he has had dealings? Not only is his situation hopeless, but even his cry for mercy." ³

And yet he is the one who goes home justified, forgiven. No, this tax collector is not the first repentant Christian. This is a Jewish parable through and through. The original audience would acknowledge that the Pharisee was entitled to pray as he did and they would be aghast that someone as unclean and shunned as the tax collector had the audacity to show up in the temple.

"The behavior of the two is caricatured: Pharisees are not that hypocritical, and toll collectors are certainly not that humble. But the story elicits responses from Jesus' audience that contradict the kind of response they might have given had they had their fairness caps on. Jesus' listeners were induced by the parable, perhaps intimidated by it, to give the kudos to the character they would have normally regarded as a sinner and then to scorn the Pharisee. That is a devastating rhetorical device." ⁴

"The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector contrasts the behavior at prayer of an "insider" and an "outsider". "The Pharisee, who thanks God he is not like the sinner standing at his side, is of course presented in caricature, just as the tax official's piety – he asks for mercy, sinner that he is – is exaggerated. Hyperbole gives the parable bite, makes it trenchant criticism of the social world Jesus inhabited by heightening the contrast between the two figures." ⁵

In most well organized societies, people know their places. They certainly did in the society of Jesus' time and place. Yet Jesus acted as if society's rules did not apply in the world or at least in the realm, which he envisioned, variously called the

kingdom of God, *basileia tou Theou*, the empire of God, or what Bob Funk now calls the divine domain. He made his own societal rules and these rules were very favorable to the poor and marginalized people and very critical of the rich and power elite. This parable is about those who are on the inside of the power structure and those who are on the outside, very much like the previous parable of the Unjust Judge.

“To suggest that the Pharisee is arrogant or morally superior misses the point that he has only done what the temple [social] map requires of those on the inside.

All peoples have such maps, and the mere having of them does not constitute self-righteousness. The Christian map in its arrogance decides that the Pharisee’s map is self-righteous, we even have painted him in negative colors so that he earns our condemnation. Our inherited Christian map blocks us from seeing that in the Pharisee’s own context his prayer depicts him as the ideal pious man. Likewise, both the prayer’s form and its content indicate that he is living up to the map drawn by the temple: he is the model pious man.”

“In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector prays in a way betokening mourning: he beats his breast, a sign of mourning and even despair. ”

“He knows his place according to the temple map.”⁶

This parable is not a polemic against the Pharisees in general or this Pharisee in particular so much as it is an invitation of the outsider, the publican, to enter into God’s domain. The divine domain is available for the outsiders as well as the insiders. Justification, simply put, is being freed from guilt. So the publican is freed from guilt and invited to be a part of the divine domain.

“But on your part and mine, eavesdroppers that we are, it takes a pair of ears attuned to irony, a heart aligned to radical reliance. Rigidity of jaw will deaden our eardrums to the allure of parable every time. Unclenched teeth, relaxed orifices, unbusied bodies: all equip us nicely for the sidelong assault of parable.” p.3

“The deepest discovery, if not the earliest, is that the parable ends up interpreting the reader, and not the other way around.”⁷

For those of us who live in the culture infused with Christian images and symbols, we maybe could turn this parable completely around. We have a traditional image that Pharisees are the “bad guys” and the toll collector is the good guy. The toll collector is redeemed while the self-righteous Pharisee is condemned to hell. To be consequential, a parable must come at us indirectly; tap us on one shoulder while approaching from the other side. So turn the parable around in your mind. In the new parabolic form, the Pharisee goes home justified, while the new Christian-imagined toll collector does not. Now that is unexpected and it now stands as a parable for today.

How are we interpreted by this parable? I will begin that quest by asking, who is on the inside and who on the outside? We have no strict rules of what is necessary to be a good, pious, Unitarian Universalist. Indeed if we have a rule, our strict rule may be that we have no rules for piety. We may look at this parable and say, Well, thank goodness I am not like those people who exclude others from their religion. But then might we not be concerned that we say we are not like those others who exclude? You see what happens here? We have separated ourselves from those who exclude. We are better than they are, they are outside our group of accepting individuals. Well now that is troubling. But that is what parables do, they trouble us. Maybe we can be safe by saying we even accept those who do not accept others.

It is easy to look at groups like the Fundamentalist Christians and their constant search for orthodoxy and their need to weed out the sinful characteristics of fallen souls. But then we place ourselves in the position of saying who is on the inside and who is not. We imagine that we are on the inside of the divine domain and they are not.

I borrow this story from the great storyteller, Ed Beutner. I am sure he borrowed from someone else:

"One day in synagogue a rabbi, a cantor, and a janitor were preparing for the Day of Atonement.

The rabbi beat his breast and bowed his head and said aloud, "I am nothing, I am nothing."

The cantor beat his breast and bowed his head and said aloud, "I am nothing, I am nothing."

The janitor beat his breast and bowed his head and said aloud, "I am nothing, I am nothing."

And the rabbi said to the cantor,
"Look who thinks he is nothing." ⁸

And so the parable of the Pharisee and Publican is a reminder about how we make distinctions, and exclusions of other folks and it is sometimes an uncomfortable reminder.

What do you folks think?

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¹ Miller, Robert J., editor, The Complete Gospels, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, p.158

² Crossan, The Dark Interval, Sonoma, CA, Polebridge Press, 1988, p.82

³ Jeremias, Joachim, The Parables of Jesus, London, SCM Press LTD, 1963, p.143

⁴ Funk, Robert, Honest to Jesus, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p.154

⁵ Ibid, p.195

⁶ Scott, Bernard Brandon, Hear Then *the Parable*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989, p.96

⁷ Beutner, Edward F., "How Jesus Took the Gist from Liturgist", The Fourth R, Vol. 12, Number 3, p.5

⁸ Ibid