

Circle of Mercy Sermon
October 23, 2016
Luke 18:9-14 (The Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector)
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It all started with a bowl of curry at lunch this week . .

But what you need to know first, is that I grew up on Harris Circle, in a neighborhood surrounded by my relatives. I could walk half a mile or more in any direction and end up at the home of someone who was related to me. My grandfather, his brother, my aunts and uncles and cousins planted gardens every year that barely had any boundaries from one another – stretching across three or more acres collectively.

My family and several members of our extended family helped my grandparents with their portion of the garden, and, as it usually happens in any common endeavor, some of us helped more than others.

One of the main crops that grew out of the bounty of the garden each year was green beans. Unlike today, when most of the time I buy just enough green beans to prepare for a single meal at a time, we used to spend hours every summer on my Nanny and Pappaw's front porch with bushels and bushels of green beans in front of us to be strung and broken. Honestly, I don't think I even knew that there were any other kinds of beans until late into my teenage years.

Stringing and breaking the beans was a serious task. We were all taught from a young age exactly how to do this. There was one right way. And, yes, we really did string every single bean – well most of us did. After the beans were strung and broken, the process of canning them

for the winter took place. As the weather grew cold, we would pull those cans from the cellar one by one throughout the winter, for meals that tasted like warm summer days.

Every once in a while in the middle of winter, when we cooked one of those cans of beans for supper and when everyone was gathered around the table to eat – you could slowly look around the table and see people’s expressions start to change. One by one, we would all start to grimace and you would see each of us starting to slip strings out of our mouths onto our napkins, and then you’d see every one of us looking closely at our plate of green beans – using our forks to pull strings off the individual beans. It sounds extreme, but eating beans with strings was the equivalent of what it feels like to find a hair in your food.

And, then someone would eventually say the words out loud in disgust – “Well, we know who strung this batch of beans.” And we all knew exactly who it had been. And if he happened to be at the table, my younger cousin would half smile, half drop his head in shame. We all knew that he had been probably on the porch when those particular beans had been prepared the previous summer. I don’t know if he hated the task, if he just didn’t care, or if he really had tried but was just terrible at it.

What I do know is that we all HATED this. Wherever it happened – we HATED it – to the extent that at potlucks, I’d try to confirm with my mom or grandmother which pots of beans they had brought. I clearly remember on multiple occasions sitting across from my dad or my sister and without a word – just with a simple look – we would know we had made the wrong choice out of the 7 or 8 pots of green beans in the potluck line.

Witnessing this response to poorly strung beans over and over again turned me into a very meticulous bean stringer and into a very judgmental bean eater. I was clear about one thing when we strung beans together each summer, I did not want a can of beans to be opened the following winter and for the people around the table to ever equate my work with my cousin's.

Back to this week . . . I ordered some curry for lunch at a local restaurant. When I received my food and started to eat, I found anger and judgment welling up from deep within me, seemingly out of nowhere. As I spooned out the curry onto the rice, the ONLY parts of the beans that were in the curry were the ends – and the ends are worse than the strings. They give themselves away immediately with their strings clearly still attached. And in that moment all of these feelings and emotions came rushing back to me.

I actually found myself looking around at the people in the kitchen, wondering which one of them had been in charge of the beans that day. As all of these memories came flooding back to me, I realized why I was having this kind of reaction to a meal that was completely edible – that contained a variety of beans that you technically don't have to string at all – which I still question to some degree, but that's an issue for me to work out in some other place.

At first, I wasn't sure about starting this sermon here. It almost seemed too trivial in light of the parable that is our focus today. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the very emotions and thoughts and feelings – what happened in my body physically – all these things that showed up within me so immediately in this particular experience, mirror the thoughts and feelings and emotions that show up within me in situations of much greater consequence than

how my green beans have been prepared (or more specifically how they have NOT been prepared).

Jesus was with some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. As was his practice, he told them a story – a parable about two people who went up to the temple to pray – one a Pharisee and one a tax collector.

Typically, when I have heard this parable, the moral of the story ends up being, “Don’t be like the judgmental Pharisee. Be like the righteous tax collector.” Clear. Concise. What’s next Jesus?

But as Amy-Jill Levine points out in her book about the parables of Jesus it is more complex than this. Once we think the message of a parable is clear and easy to get, we need to quickly put on the breaks. We need to stop and examine our assumptions about and interpretation of the story. In this particular parable, Luke tells us that Jesus is addressing a group of people who think of themselves as the ones on the inside, the ones who get it, the ones consider themselves to be righteous and who see others through a lens of contempt and judgment.

One of the real punches of this parable is that it catches us in this very act of judgment – of both the Pharisee and the tax collector.

As soon as the words come out of our mouths, “I sure am glad I’m not like the Pharisee” or “I sure hope the tax collector really was sincere in his prayers and went away changed and stopped

taking advantage of the people” this parable catches us too. Once we allow our minds to start walking down the path of judgment, and we feel the anger, disgust, or contempt welling up within us, it becomes clear that the message of this parable is one that never ceases to speak to us. And if any of you are like me, I need to be in conversation with this parable daily.

It’s important to note here how the people who heard Jesus tell this parable would have actually heard it, how they would have seen the Pharisee and the tax collector. Centuries of interpretation cloud our understanding of these two people. Even the writers of the Gospels contribute to this muddy understanding to some degree.¹ We typically side with the tax collector, since he was the one who seemingly went away justified.

As you probably know the Pharisees get a bad rap in the Christian tradition. We often presume that they are the bad guys – the bad Jews – in the story, but that’s not really the case – and not necessarily the way that Jesus’s original audience would have viewed them. In this particular story, the negative view of the Pharisee seems to come more from Luke’s commentary than from what Jesus actually said.

Luke and the other Gospel writers had established a picture of the righteous tax collector (think Zaccheus, who climbed the sycamore tree to get a look at Jesus and ended up inviting him to his home for a meal and repaid everyone he had taken advantage of – check – GOOD tax collector; and Levi who was one of the 12 called as a disciple, who left his work and followed Jesus – check – GOOD tax collector).

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, (New York: Harper One, 2006), 38-39.

But the hearers of Jesus's stories would have found it shocking for a tax collector to be presumed righteous over a Pharisee. "The very idea that a tax collector would receive approval over a Pharisee should, instead shock. To see the tax collector as justified is tantamount to a member of the local population claiming to be an agent of a foreign invading government, an agent whose job it is to take money from the local population and funnel it to the capital of the invading empire, is the one to be admired and serve as a moral exemplar."²

So whether we hear this story through our own ears or if we try to hear this story through the ears of the first century people who heard Jesus tell it, when we identify with either the Pharisee or the tax collector and find ourselves in a place of judgment toward one or other of them, Jesus has us right where he wants us to be – in that uncomfortable place, in the messiness of life as we know it.

Let's look at what we know about the Pharisee and the tax collector in this parable. They have a lot more in common than we might see at first glance. First, both of them have gone up to the temple to pray. They are both approaching God in a posture of prayer. They both would have been allowed into the Temple – meeting the communal expectations for entry into the sacred space. They wouldn't have been allowed in the Temple at all if they had not been considered ritually clean. Even though the tax collector had sold out his own people in many ways, "moral purity is not the same thing as ritual purity."³ It would have been possible that the tax collector was ritually, but not morally pure.

² Ibid, 38.

³ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (New York: Harper One, 2014), 188.

Both the Pharisee and the tax collector are distant from others in the story. The Pharisee was “standing by himself.” The tax collector was “standing far off.” In reality, they both find themselves isolated in this scene, rather than being connected to others. Nowhere in the parable does it say that others moved away from them or that they were relegated by anyone else to stand by themselves or stand far off in the Temple. This seems to be where they positioned themselves.

The Pharisee’s prayer, often interpreted as judgmental, actually begins with thanksgiving, “God, I thank you...”⁴ It is likely a genuine prayer, even as it lands him on the slippery slope of self-righteousness and superiority, but he belongs in the Temple. He is doing what he is supposed to do. He is being a good Pharisee – even if in an exaggerated way. He makes the point that he is going above and beyond in all of the things that are proscribed for him to do – praying, fasting, and tithing. How different is his prayer from when we comment, “There but for the grace of God, go I?” How different is his stance in prayer from our own exaggerated sense of ourselves when we see ourselves going above and beyond what is required?

The tax collector’s prayer is a prayer for mercy, a prayer for grace. He acknowledges that he is a sinner and stands in need of God’s mercy and grace. His very vocation as a tax collector for the empire puts him in a place where he sins against his own people daily. And I wonder if his placing himself far off from others indicates his deep awareness of this daily sin. I wonder if he knows that he is trapped in a corrupt system, a system that possibly enables him to take care of

⁴ Luke 18:11, NRSV.

and feed his family, a system that possibly requires him to sell out his own people on a regular basis. How different is his prayer from our own around the places where we feel complicit in systems that injure or deprive others in some way?

Commentators have often affirmed the interpretation of this parable where the tax collector is seen in a positive light and the Pharisee is seen in a negative light, particularly through words at the end of parable: “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.”⁵

However, the word for rather – *para* in Greek– can have two different meanings. It can mean “instead of” **OR** it can mean “because of.” Levine argues that if we set aside for a moment Luke’s tag line at the close of the parable (a tag line that shows up in other places in the Gospel) “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted,”⁶ that “its primary connotation is not one of antagonism (“rather”) but of juxtaposition (“next to”) . . . Therefore . . . the parable should conclude, “‘This man went down to his home justified alongside the other’ or even ‘because of the other.’”

And this makes more sense historically because Judaism is a community movement, a movement based in covenant relationship . . . in which each member of the community is responsible for the other.”⁷ Maybe the over-zealous religious disciplines of the Pharisee helped carry along tax collector, in the sense that he was part of the community, even when his vocation included sins against other members of the community. In short, the good deeds of one person can have a

⁵ Luke 18:14, NRSV.

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⁷ Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 192-193.

positive impact on others in the community, just as much as the sins of one person can have a negative impact on other members of the community.⁸

In the context of the covenant community and in the eyes of God's divine justice, could there actually be room for both the Pharisee and the tax collector? Is God's grace is big enough to include both of them? As soon as we begin to side with the tax collector or the Pharisee, naming one as better or greater than the other, judging ones prayer as better or more holy than the other, this parable catches us too. When we attempt to reduce this parable to a choice between the actions of these two characters – that one is more right or more wrong – that one is more justified or less deserving of God's mercy than the other, then the story has us right where Jesus wants us to be – in that uncomfortable space, in the messiness of life as we know it.

The reality is that the Pharisee and the tax collector are alive within each of us, pulsing through our veins at the same time in any given moment.

We are the Pharisee – doing the best that we can to do the things that we know we are called to do in the world and recognizing that sometimes this even spills out of us in messy and judgmental ways.

We are the tax collector – caught up in systems that benefit us in one way or another, sinning in ways that hurt our brothers and sisters far and wide, while at the same time grieving and beating

⁸ Ibid, 193.

our chests because even through our best efforts, we can't seem to pull ourselves completely out of those systems.

The Pharisee and the tax collector are alive and well within each of us:

- When we engage with a family member or friend with political or religious or social leanings that are vastly different from our own.
- When we become isolated and stand by ourselves or stand far off – distancing ourselves from our community.
- When we become paralyzed by our own rigid ways of thinking, acting and being in the world.
- When we think that anything we do or don't do has the capacity to separate us from the love and mercy and grace of God.

If we can actually pull off living into the truth in this story – that we each go out justified alongside **AND** because of each other, we may be a little bit closer to understanding more fully that we have to trust in something beyond ourselves, that we desperately need each other. When we are able to find ourselves in these moments of trust that enable us to reach beyond what we think we already know, we might begin to see more clearly that it is possible for two different things to be true and at work at the same time within us. This doesn't let us off the hook. This doesn't offer us an easy out with permission to be complacent. This certainly doesn't provide us a clear path to follow. It does, however, require us to recognize and engage in this paradox within ourselves. It requires us to recognize that we need to continue walking alongside each

other because the story will never be fully known in this world if we allow ourselves to stand far off or by ourselves.

I remain confident that I am really good at stringing beans, **AND** in hindsight, I know that any one or two or ten of those strings still attached to beans in those cans, years ago in the middle of winter, could have been my own.

Amen.