

“Those Who Repent Will Be Exalted,” by Christa J Fisher

Luke 18.9-14  
October 21, 2016

In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus introduces us to two characters, a Pharisee and a tax collector, two men each with an enormous amount of power. The tax collector, as we just read, is aware of his sin, comes before God repenting, and is declared by Jesus to be justified. The Pharisee, whose sin is less obvious, but no less destructive, uses prayer as an opportunity for personal posturing, listing his many good deeds to God while simultaneously criticizing others. Jesus concludes this lesson with a very clear promise “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

I want to tell you a bit about Pharisees and tax collectors, as they assume a prominent role in today’s lesson and frequently appear in the Gospels. Pharisees were religious leaders with the responsibility of interpreting, crafting and to some extent, enforcing religious law. The word Pharisee means “to be set apart,” and they were. They lived separate from the community and their interaction with the community was limited to their professional responsibilities. Pharisees were establishing laws for the Jewish people but had limited understanding of the impact these laws were having on peoples’ ability to live and thrive.

Tax collectors on the other-hand lived and worked in the community and they were despised. When the government needed money (for whatever reason) they would auction off tax-rights, selling to the highest bidder. As with any auction, once the bidding is closed, the seller is paid in full, in this case the Roman government, and the financial burden is assumed by the purchaser, in this case the taxation company. Taxation companies would then hire tax-collectors to collect from the public the full amount of the tax bill, plus all their expenses and profit. Tax collector’s were allowed to determine their own personal profit and they were allowed to use any means necessary to collect this money and they were not liable to prosecution under Roman Law, because they were considered to be public-servants. (SPQR – A History of Ancient Rome, Mary Beard, p263)

I provide this brief history lesson so that we can fully comprehend the magnitude of Jesus’ message and his promise. Jesus is deliberate about his use of language. He is not impetuous. He specifically and intentionally cited a Pharisee and a tax-collector in this story. If the message of the lesson was simply a condemnation of judgement, what we think and say about others, then Jesus could have named anyone, because we are all guilty of this sin. But he didn’t. He used two men who exploited their professional power for personal gain at the expense of others. And he has good reason for this.

Given that we are in the midst of a presidential election, I'm guessing many of you are already drawing parallels between the Gospel reading and modern circumstances. It's very tempting because the similarities are so obvious! But, lest we think this is story just about government officials, let's not forget that it was the Pharisee, a representative of God and God's people, who was unwilling to repent.

Recently our congregation read Jim Wallis's book, "America's Original Sin" and we are currently reading Michelle Alexander's book, "The New Jim Crow." Each of these books names the church's culpability in the racialization and dehumanization of God's people. Since reading these books I have been thinking much about the necessity for individual and collective Christian repentance. The more I learn, the more strongly I feel that our nation cannot heal unless and until we are willing to repent. And, like the Pharisee, we cannot repent for that which we do not know.

For the October *Dialogue*, our monthly Church newsletter, Pastor Stephen wrote a piece encouraging us to begin praying about and imagining ourselves as a truly transformed community of faith – a place where walls which separate us from each other and the rest of our community are transformed into bridges connecting us as brothers and sisters, to each other and to God. Pastor Stephen's vision is of an open and inclusive community and he suggests in his article that to begin this process of transformation we must start with pursuit of truth, genuine lament and repentance.

The Pharisee, because he lived in his own protected world, he lived "set apart" from others, was unaware of the ways in which he and his institution were hurting God's people. And due to his lack of knowledge, he felt justified in his behaviors. As one called by the Holy Spirit to serve God and God's people, who in his heart truly wanted to do good, he could not have so confidently engaged in this type of behavior had he known the people about whom he was speaking and the ways his laws impacted their lives.

The first step in transformation is knowledge, the pursuit of truth.

The tax-collector, because he was working on the ground, amidst the people, was well aware of the impact his actions were having on others. Each day as he left his home and went to work he was forced to face the truth. It was unavoidable. And he was overcome with grief. Unable to look towards heaven, he hits his chest as he cries out, "Have mercy on me, a sinner!" The Greek conveys his emotion so much more effectively than the English. He is saying to God, "I am the greatest of sinners" and "I am begging for Your mercy, for help that I do not deserve."

The first step in transformation is knowledge, pursuit of truth. Once we are open to the truth, we cannot help but lament.

The tax collector's story, however, does not end with a lament – it ends with justification. Jesus says “this man went home justified.” To be made justified means to be made “upright, just and fair” by God. Lament is not cause for justification - repentance is. Lament is simply an emotional response to shameful truths. Repentance is being changed by these truths. To repent is to turn from evil and to turn toward good – to abandon our sinful intentions and sinful deeds – to be radically changed. To repent is as simple and as terribly difficult as that. Which is why the tax collector was begging for mercy – “Help me, God! For I cannot do this on my own!” And God is merciful. So God did and God does.

The first step in transformation is knowledge, pursuit of truth. Once we are open to the truth, we cannot help but lament. And our lament drives us to repentance. And, Jesus promises us that those who repent, those whom humble themselves, will be exalted.

Today we are officially welcoming 29 people into our faith community and one very small person into the universal family of Christ. As we do this we make vows that we will together work to “serve all people, following the example of Jesus, striving for peace and justice in all the earth.” We are making vows, we are committing ourselves to becoming the bridges of which Pastor Stephen wrote. Like the Pharisee, one who was called by Holy Spirit to serve God's people, we have the very best of intentions. And like the tax-collector we know that our task is not so simple.

Such a task, in fact, has rarely ever been undertaken by a Christian community, which is one reason the Christian Church is in need of repentance. For far too long, we Christians have accepted and not challenged the decrees of our “set apart” institution, not knowing how our collective actions and inactions are impacting others. We have not been committed to the pursuit of truth.

But we, you and I, are not defined or limited by the past.

For we are children of God and followers of Jesus Christ. The shackles of the past, the pain of the cross, call us to a new future and the resurrection empowers us to strive something better.

We are called and empowered to be truth seekers and to be truth speakers.

We are called and empowered to dismantle barriers and to build bridges.

We are called and empowered to value and affirm the humanity of every person.

We called and empowered to serve all people, to strive for peace and justice in all the earth.

We are called and empowered to believe in and seek out God's Kingdom on Earth.

We are called and empowered to believe that God's Kingdom can exist right here at Lake Edge.

And we are called and empowered to Repent.

For we are children of a Merciful God which means it is safe and good for us to bring our sins to the foot of the cross, to lament our sin, and to beg for God's Mercy.

And when we do, our Merciful God will help us to stand up, turn our selves around, and live and walk in a new way.

And Jesus will say of us "these people, these people, they went home justified!"

AMEN