

Sermon: All Who Are Humble

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22; Luke 18:9-14**

Of our two readings today, one, the parable, may be familiar to us while the other, maybe not so much. But, in each, through the acknowledgement of transgressions, are the beginnings of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We're going to talk mostly about the parable in Luke, but Jeremiah provides the setup, so we'll start there.

Israel and Judah are the two divided and now-defunct kingdoms, and Zion is Jerusalem, Judah's capital and location of the Temple. We've jumped back several chapters from last week, when God spoke about the restoration of Israel and Judah at the end of the Exile, but today we're in an earlier time when the people can see disaster coming and God is very unhappy with them. It's all explained in verses 11 through 18 so if you go back and read them, you'll understand.

But long story short: the passage begins with a confession and a plea for help. The people now understand that God is in their midst, which reflects a new perspective, because previously, it was understood that you could only approach God in the Temple.

The turning point comes in verse 20, when the people acknowledge their wickedness and the guilt of their ancestors. They beg God to remember the covenant, but it's unclear which one they mean, the one made with Moses or the one made with David. That one assured the people of a kingdom ruled by a king of David's line, and that the kingdom would last forever.

On the surface, it may have seemed like a good idea to remind God about this, but it was dangerous because covenantal blessings also call for specific punishments.

And then they call on God to think about how it might look to the other nations if God refused to help. So, even though they may be terrified by their situation, perhaps they are not yet truly contrite. This could be a case of a prayer acting as a form of persuasion.

Which brings us to Luke and a parable about prayer and humility.

It follows immediately after last week's parable of the unrighteous judge and the persistent widow. That one was spoken to the disciples. In today's parable, Jesus addresses 'some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.'

So, who is Jesus really talking to? We know that at least the disciples are present. Pharisees and scribes always seem to be lurking about too, along with the ever-present crowds. And then there's Luke's audience, and now us.

In the parable, Jesus points out a particular Pharisee and a particular tax collector. They do not represent *all* Pharisees or *all* tax collectors, though any Pharisees listening in probably took it personally.

Society considered the Pharisees as a group to be models of purity, a view which the Pharisees themselves helped perpetuate. We see that in how this one Pharisee commends himself and condemns the tax collector. In this translation, Luke says the Pharisee stands by himself. It could also be that the Pharisee stood and prayed these things *about himself*.

Either way, he starts out by thanking God that he is not like the thieves, rogues, or adulterers, or even that guy over there. But then he *tells* God that he gives a tenth of all his income. Some translations say that he tithes a tenth of all "he gets." What he "gets" is taken from the peasants and given to the Temple treasury, from which he is paid. In effect, his income is gained by a form of extortion, and he's proud of the tenth of it that he offers to God.

The problem here is that he only speaks of what he does to justify himself; what he said does not constitute a prayer.

As for tax collectors, they had it rough. They were at the bottom of the professional economic scale, earning a subsistence-level income in a dead-end job working for a foreign power. To make ends meet, they skimmed a little off the top by inflating the amounts owed by the people, who despised them as traitors beyond redemption. *No one liked them*.

The Pharisee and the tax collector are part of the same system of taxation and tribute-taking. What the Pharisee does is *hidden* while what the tax collector does is *highly visible*. They are two sides of the same coin.

The big difference is that the tax collector stood "far off" physically, morally, and spiritually while the Pharisee seems completely unaware of how far off the mark he is in every way. One is praying for mercy and the other is talking about himself. Jesus tells this parable as a warning to anyone for whom giving thanks has turned into self-praise.

Is it a surprise to hear that God exalts, or justifies, or acquits, the tax collector *on the basis of his prayer*? It might have surprised Luke's audience. And not only that, but God also acquits *all* who humble themselves in prayer. This is the work of God, through Jesus, which we can't do for ourselves.

This parable, then, relates to the ways people approach God.

God exalts the humble – but does the tax collector know this? Does he walk out of the Temple *knowing* that God's grace and mercy have come to him, or does he continue to live in grief and shame, knowing only that his neighbors held him in contempt?

Does the Pharisee realize that it's thin where he's skating? Does *he* leave the Temple feeling justified? How would he know if he is or not? What if each of them could see the world through God's eyes? How might that change the way they see themselves?

In the end, we can only be honest when we stand before God in prayer.

How often are we thankful that we're not like other people? "There but for the grace of God go I," right? But do we ever admit to God or anyone that we sometimes miss the mark? Like the tax collector, do we recognize our sinfulness? Does that recognition bring us sorrow, enough to make us beg for mercy?

We know people who fast, and people who tithe a portion of their income, but does God need our tithes or our fasting? Do we do these things because it's easier to *seem* pious than to *be* humble – truly humble, to the point of being grief-stricken like the tax collector?

Just as we can't give ourselves a nickname, we can't just *say* we're humble; we have to *be* humble. Speaking only for myself, I can't seriously say that "I'm handsome and humble;" it doesn't work that way – humility needs to be part of our being.

The prophet Amos can tell us how God feels about it. Paraphrasing, the LORD said, "You can offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, but I will not accept them; instead, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:22-24).

When we re-orient to what God expects – justice and righteousness – when we look at the world from God's point of view, we can only see things differently.

Jesus exposed the public façade of oppression. He exposed those who would take advantage of their neighbor. He tore the veil hanging between our reality and God's. And he

reorients us to what God expects in order to get us away from doing what we have become used to doing or what we feel most comfortable doing.

We are all free to stand far off by ourselves in our own private prayer time to lay it all out to God. It's humbling and confessional and we should do it every day. It frees us from our past and from the weight of what we've done – or not done. We get a fresh start and a new outlook.

The Good News tells us that *all* who humble themselves and confess to God *what God already knows* will be exalted.

Re-orienting leads to self-knowledge, re-evaluation, and transformation. What this parable teaches is our need to look within and reflect on our relationship with God – is it honest and direct or are we just maintaining a façade? Are we self-aware when we seek out the God who made us? The true confession of our weakness will get us acquitted even if we can't be sure that we are. All God wants is justice in all that we do, for everyone. And for us to walk humbly.

Amen.