

Two men went up to the temple to pray – one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. In a heart beat Jesus had their attention. The Pharisee was expected to pray, but the tax collector? Jesus is setting up polar opposites here. Even though they've been getting a bad rap throughout Luke's telling of the story, the Pharisees still enjoyed a high degree of respect and recognition in the Jewish community. They ran the synagogue.

Let me offer a bit of a history, before we get too hostile towards the Pharisees ourselves. In the early days of temple worship, it was rightly observed that a once-a-year trek to the temple to take care of a year's worth of study, confession, alms-giving, and worship was simply not good enough. We used to see that at Naramata Centre all the time. People used to say to me all the time, I come here once a year to get my spiritual fix. Like we don't have place for spiritual practice the other 51 weeks a year. Not good. So, in those very early days, it was determined that the local synagogue, would serve as the weekly place of worship and study, mission and community.

The Pharisees were the ones who established community worship centers, the synagogues, to respond to the weekly needs of faithful Jews. This was a good thing. The Pharisees brought temple worship to the people. The problem was that in bringing temple worship to the people, they brought a fairly standard way of approaching all issues – one way to worship, one way to study, one way to serve the poor, one way to do synagogue business. And by the time Jesus entered the picture, the Pharisees were pretty entrenched. This is a classic case of "your greatest weakness, is your greatest strength, overdone." When religious authorities determine that there is only one right way to do anything, the community bumps into trouble, especially when places of privilege and community influence are thrown into the mix. As much as Jesus hung around the Pharisees, he was suspicious of their narrow mindedness.

So, the Pharisee is the first to come to pray. And you can see him come in. He likely sees the other guy and he definitely stands well apart from him. The Pharisee probably looks around the gathering place to see who was here. He probably wears the finest robes and prayer shawls. And people naturally respect his positional power. Can't you just see him? Can't you just hear him? "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

You'll remember that I said Jesus had them hooked right away. Not by the Pharisee, but by the tax collector. He's the one they all hate. He's the one who shouldn't be anywhere near the place of prayer. Who does he think he is?

Tax collectors in first century Palestine worked for Rome. They were likely the equivalent of the Jewish middle class who sold out to Rome to make a buck, a very big buck. A price tag was set, a personal tax was established for every man, woman and child. Rome hired the Tax Collectors to pay that prescribed amount of money. How the Tax Collector collected that money was of no interest to Rome...so with the power of Rome behind them, most often tax collector's scooped way more money than what was owed and pocketed the difference. The tax collector was ripping off his friends, his family, his faith community for personal gain.

When this man comes to pray, he likely sneaks in, hoping he's not seen. He finds a quiet spot near the front, puts his head down and says "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The moral of the message – one of these men is justified, the one who lives into his own humility, his own honest assessment of himself...the other is not.

Look at how the Pharisee is looking down his nose at the tax collector. You can tell by the way Luke records the story, in Jesus' mind, these two men are not that much different from one another. The Pharisee looks at the tax collector with complete disdain and rejection. The tax collector just shows up. The Pharisee is following the temple law. The tax collector just feels bad. From my perspective, they're both impoverished. The Pharisee is looking upon the tax collector who isn't looking anywhere. And I wonder if that's true. I wonder if the Tax Collector isn't also looking back at the Pharisee. Perhaps not today in the telling of this particular story, but perhaps the Tax Collector looks back on a different day.

I remember early this year, Sheila, Luke and I went to the Vancouver Aquarium and it was grand adventure. There are so many wonderful things to do here in Vancouver, I love it here. If I've told you this story before, zone out for a minute. After exploring many of the exhibits, we went downstairs to watch the beluga whales; they had just finished their daily training exercises. I was the last to arrive, but I noticed everyone there was sitting on the benches just watching the belugas swim back and forth. And everyone looked like they were watching paint dry.

There wasn't a place for me to sit down, so I stood very close to the glass of the beluga tank, leaning against a cement pillar just watching. I was by myself. As soon as the mother beluga swam past this time, I swear to you, she virtually stopped and turned around, and slowly swam by the very place where I was standing...and her eyeball was looking at me. She seemed to be checking me out. She passed by and came back and this time she turned at the glass and she rubbed her belly against the side of the glass right where I was standing, like she wanted me to scratch her somewhere. Talk about who is looking at who in the zoo. She disappeared again, and this time, when she returned, I'm not kidding, she brought her baby.

And they both passed by where I was standing, checking me out, but by this time others had joined me at the glass, totally surprised at the mother whale's behavior. Mom and baby passed by twice more before swimming away to resume their pattern of swimming back and forth. It was a truly holy moment. When I looked upon the belugas I was stunned by their beauty and their elegance. But on that day, for the first time ever, I wondered, what did the mother beluga see in me as she looked at me looking at her.

Who's looking at who indeed. As I consider this text, and what's on my mind and heart this morning, this is exactly the question I'm asking. Here we've got the Pharisee looking down upon the tax collector and I can't help but believe that eventually, the tax collector looks back. Who am I looking at through my Pharisee eyes....and who is looking back at me through their beluga eyes, or their human humble eyes? Imagine – it may well be the eyes of God.

Recently, I have been having the liveliest of conversations with the outreach worker from Canadian Mental Health who works most closely with the homeless population on the North Shore. A Spanish woman from Columbia, Sandra Vasquez used to work with the street children of Bogota. Not like our street youth....we're talking four and five year olds living by the landfill. The most startling information she shared with me and with Shelagh Stevens, is that her case load in North Vancouver has gone from about 170 homeless to 472 homeless in one year. 300 cases. A 75% increase - in one year. Five families are included in this list, two, 2-parent families with teens, and three single moms with infants and toddlers.

I'm told many of them couch surf, staying with friends for a day or two and then moving on to another couch. I'm told they sleep in tents in parks. I'm told they spend their days in malls, at the food bank and at the bottle depots. I'm told they receive our sandwiches as a "tide-me-over" until they receive their social service income or disability pension. I'm told most live with some kind of health, mental or physical disability. When I began to bristle about where they came from, and how they got here, Sandra simply said "doesn't matter, all I know is that they're here." Contrary to popular mythology, we do have homelessness in North Vancouver. It's not going away. And the population is getting bigger.

God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this homeless person.

We're just mobilizing our outreach and social justice team here at Lynn Valley Church, we had our first meeting last Saturday. We are beginning to think about how to offer leadership to the congregation's passions for local, national and international mission. There will be a second meeting coming up in November...watch the website. But as I think about the homeless, looking at me, perhaps even through the eyes of God, I'm thinking about the workshop that we're about to have immediately following the service. We'll be exploring this congregation's call to active hospitality as we think about the housing options that are open to us, the possibility for partnering with a developer, and perhaps other churches, or social

service groups, and the call of the gospel. It's really important that you all stay to offer your opinion about what you think this church's future ought to be; knowing full well that in ten years many of us will not be here.

Nelson Henderson, a rugby national who left Ireland in the 1800's to escape the "great hunger" came to Canada with his parents. He served in the trenches of the Great War, made a farm, married, and raised a large family. When Nelson's son graduated from school, he wrote his son a letter and it began with this sentence: "The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit."

Today, my friends, and next Saturday, you are being asked to express your vision of a church that responds to the gospel call of humility; to build a church, to create a housing development that reflects the values of relevant hospitality, active hospitality, vital community relationships.

Today, you are being asked to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit, to think beyond what we have now, to imagine property development partnerships we do not yet have, to imagine a church filled with people you may never meet; whose passions for living a life of meaning are being explored, safely, in the context of a worshipping community. Today is the day to look past our feelings of poverty, to see again for the first time, the abundance of energy, time and money that knocked off yet another fall fair. Today is the day to look at those who may benefit from our very own housing project, in relationships we don't yet imagine and refrain from saying "I'm not like you" but to see them and wonder "what do they see in us?" May we respond well. Amen.