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Sermon transcript St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 23 October 2022

Celebrant and preacher: Rev. Canon Peter Parker

Sermon starts at: 37:57

Readings: Joel 2:23-37, Luke 18:9-14

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqeyzWw50kg>

I speak to you now in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, it used to be called: I've always considered that a very poor use of the word ‘publican’ - why should we pick on people who run pubs? I for one think they provide a fine service to the community! Perhaps it would be better to call this the Parable of the Good Pharisee and the Penitent Scoundrel; after all, the Pharisee was a pretty decent person. I trust not many of you are thieves, rogues or adulterers, but how many can say, “I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all my income”? A few dozen people like that could really turn around the fortunes of our church, couldn't they? My point is that this Pharisee praying in the temple is not someone to despise or look down on. He would be a valued member of any synagogue, or of any parish, for that matter.

On the other hand, the tax collector – well, he was a collaborator with the Roman occupation army. The Romans paid him to collect taxes from the people of Jerusalem, and they gave him a cut for doing it. He was an embarrassment, in many ways a shameful traitor to his people. Think of the Romans as the latest colonial invaders: the tax collector was a local citizen, part of a population who had been there for some eight hundred to a thousand years, but he was working on the side of the colonialists. The Romans looked down on these people, and his own compatriots looked down on him even more, probably shunned him. He knew that in the temple he could not approach others. He wasn't really supposed to be in the temple as a sinner, unclean, so he stood far off. We wouldn't really want too many people like that in our congregation. But we learned that he went away justified, right with God, whereas the other, the decent fellow, did not.

So we interpret the parable as a lesson about humility, about recognizing who you are and focusing on your sinfulness before God. But just a minute: we condemn the Pharisee for focusing on himself. Do we praise the penitent sinner for focusing on himself? because that's what he's doing: “I am a sinner, I am a miserable excuse for a human being, I am terrible. Just awful, that's me.” Now in the usual interpretation of the parable, it is that quality of self-condemnation that earns him his justification. We must be humble, not like the Pharisee who looks down on him. Well, it really wasn't just the self-focusing that was the point of the parable: it was the arrogance of the Pharisee, the scorn of another human being, and the lack of his awareness of his own sin, that was shown by the good Pharisee.

Years ago I had a recording of an address by a woman called Gertrude Behanna, a New York socialite who had become severely addicted to drugs and nearly died, and recovered miraculously, and became an inspirational Christian teacher and speaker. I remember her saying, “It’s not the big sins that get you, like adultery and murder and stealing and all that; it's the little niggling ‘Christian sins’, like the way we look down on people who look down on people.”[[1]](#footnote-1) If you're not careful in reading this parable, we end up looking down on the Pharisee for looking down on the tax Collector, and we praise the tax collector for looking down on himself. Both interpretations, I believe, miss the fundamental point. Look at the words of the prayers offered by each: the Pharisee says, “I thank you God that I do this, and I do that, and I am not like him,” and the other begins, “God be merciful to me.”

The point here is that we will not discover our wholeness, our salvation, our justification, by focusing on ourselves. It's not about us, it's about God and God's mercy, nothing else. The gift of God's grace is the source of our healing: nothing else. So whether we are feeling quite successful in our spiritual journey like the good and decent Pharisee, or whether we're feeling like spiritual failures like the tax collector, it's not about us: it's about God, and God's grace and mercy working in us.

One of my summer school professors, a Scottish theologian, taught us one day, “Grace is not about us getting it right: it's about God loving us while we're getting it wrong.” Whether we are feeling like a vibrant and successful Church community or more like a fragile and battered little congregation who might not make it, it's not about us. It's about the grace and power and mercy of God. Whether we feel Canada is a fine and honorable country and culture to belong to, or whether we feel Canada has failed, and is still failing, to take real and proper steps towards reconciliation with First Nations who have been, and continue to be, treated so poorly, it isn't about us. It's about God's power to transform and heal us. That is where our focus should always be - that is the one thing the penitent sinner got right: God be merciful to me. God was his first focus.

Now sometimes we take ourselves a little too seriously; sometimes we tend to think we are indeed the most miserable sinners. In fact some of us grew up being brainwashed week after week with that very phrase, “miserable sinners, not worthy to eat the crumbs off the floor,” (If you don't recognize those phrases, they're found in the old Anglican prayer book.[[2]](#footnote-2)) While we're focusing on how depraved and horrible we are, I suspect God is shaking the divine head and saying, “Don't overestimate yourself; you just aren't that evil. Maybe you've wandered a bit, but I made you in the first place, so get over it. Just accept my forgiveness and get on with life.”

That line of thinking was not popular when Jesus gave his versions of it – no one had a right to talk like that. They said, “Who does he think he is that he can speak God's forgiveness like that?” Well, Jesus had read the prophet Joel as well, and he really understood what Joel was saying when the prophet wrote, “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, shall be made whole.” That's what the penitent sinner got right: he began by calling on the Lord. Lord, be merciful to me a sinner: God hears that cry from each of us, and from the church.

Our healing, our justification before God, depends not on what we do to approach God, but upon God's free gift of grace, that grace which is not about us getting it right, but about God loving us while we're getting it wrong. In our spiritual journey as individuals and in our corporate journey as a nation, we will move forward in reconciliation when we learn that it is not our own little efforts which will heal us but the grace of a loving creator who can take even our smallest acts of penitence and good will and turn them into a vast, healing, reconciling movement. Thanks be to God.

1. “God Isn’t Dead” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7z0DBC3DX9U> from 15:00 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From the Confession: “But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults. Restore thou them that are penitent, according to thy promises…” and the Prayer of Humble Access before communion: “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy…” (Book of Common Prayer) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)