

Where we each stand
Menno Mennonite Church
June 6 2021

Purpose: To relate the unity of the spirit as we come before God.

Message: As people of Faith, God meets with equity no matter where we begin.

Scripture: Luke 18: 9-14

Synopsis: We like this story, at least by in large. As is our want, we know who is who in the story. We know to cheer for and which team is right. We know, deeply some times, who we want to be right, virtuous. Most of the time we then identify with the one who we want to be held as the model. Yet, in doing so, we inadvertently step into the very differentiation that Jesus is warning against. We are invited time and again to know that God welcomes us each where we are for who we are.

(Luk 18:9-14 NIV) ⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.

¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

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There are moments where the point of the story is pretty obvious. You know who is who, and the moral clarity of the story leaves us without too much doubt of where we ought to be. When the little boy has cried wolf one too many times, no one is left wondering whether it is bright idea to go around telling tales. Little Red Riding Hood teaches a basic suspicion of the situations that don't seem quite right, and to trust our senses (that and it is apparently convenient to have an ax wielding woodsman near to hand should things go sideways). There is a frequent conversation in our household pondering what it is about the Germanic psyche that these are the stories that we end up telling our kids. Imagine my surprise when one of my favorite bounce-your-kid on your knee riding rhymes involves the promise of ravens nibbling at the fallen rider when rendered in translation. A bit dark if you ask me. Be that as it may, you know where you stand and which side of the story you want to be on when it is all over, with little room for doubt.

This story is very much the same. Like the children's story showed well, we know who to cheer for and where this all leads. For a change it seems that Jesus is being relatively forthright in his parable telling. The characters are relatable, even familiar. There is the pharisee long enemy of Jesus' ministry, playing the roll that they were born to play: the self-righteous important figure who is blameless before the law. And he knows it too. The other straw man is equally familiar and typical—the hated tax collector who has sold out the people for power and wealth. Not only a bad guy, but he was also a traitor. This prayer does not include the necessary promises of reformation, life change, or the 12 steps of recovering exploiters of Israel that we expect to hear. All we get is a plea for mercy, and a hallow one at that. With these two on the stage, we can almost hear Jesus' crowd hissing and cheering in their proper turn. The fact that it turns out to be the one who is downtrodden in society is the one who leaves justified before God is not surprising—this is Jesus we are talking about here. The moral of the story is exactly what we are told: those who exalt themselves above others will be humbled, those who are humble will be exalted. Be humble like the righteous tax collector and you are golden. Easily done; we cheer for the metaphorical tax collectors in our midst, never get too prideful of ourselves, and avoid the pitfall of hypocrisy here.

At which time we fall into Luke and Jesus' trap. We are not pharisees and thank God for that. We can know that we are the humbler, more modest sinner as we ought to be. But I think it is in deriving the lesson being about us and our behavior is some of the danger exists in this parable. As is so often the case, we read the lessons of Jesus expecting advice on how to be,

behave, and believe. That is what we get to be sure—and thankfully so. But it isn't all that we get. There is more to the story here. Because as much as this is a reminder to be mindful of the manner in which we pray, I think there is a message within as well regarding who God is and what that means.

This speaks from both ends of the story. The pharisee knows who and what he is. He makes his recitation of the ways in which he has done the work—fasting, giving, working, restraining himself to get his just and well-earned reward. He lives the good life, if he says so himself, and has gotten good at it, and is proud of that achievement. But in doing so he confuses his life and his discipline for the source of that life and the direction of that practice. He forgets that all that he does is not about making him a better Jew; it is about responding to God with him, through him and out of him with gratitude and knowledge that the point of everything he is doing is to be made more into the creation he was meant first to be. The minute we take this parable to heart and decide that we don't do what the Pharisee does, we are subject to the very failing that yields the conversation in the first place. And then the trap has sprung. It is not about you, you see. Not your humility or lack of pride or even about your being a child of the right faith or one justified by that faith. Religion is not about you; it is about God.

Alternately, taking on the role of the tax collector has a similar challenge. Here, if we are only to occupy the role of the penitent and self-reproaching sinner, we are also challenged. We can live a lot of our spiritual lives not being led by the hand of a loving God and guiding savior but worrying how we might have gotten here in the first place and wondering if we belong; suspecting that we can never really be loved. I don't think any of us need a weekend retreat to identify our spiritual shortcomings; they are all right here ready before us. I know all too well precisely how unreformed my heart is, where my pride is centered, and my hubris run amuck. I know the ways that I fail to be as devoted as I might, and I fear the times where I fail the particular call to love God with heart, soul, and mind and my neighbor as myself. But here, the same advice continues to apply: It is not about you; it is about me—about God. You may well be a wretch, sinner, lost sheep—pick your term. But that status is well outstripped by God's ability to work in me, through me, and in spite of me, even when I get it wrong. Seeking God is not, really, about me; it is about God. What both men needed here was more than mere justification in the temple. They needed to come to the temple and know themselves beyond how they saw themselves, and in the process know a bit better the God to whom they are

praying, leaving space to be amazed by that which happens when we seek YHWH God, and are surprised along the way.

I am always amazed by air travel and have long harbored a desire to get my private pilot's license. I always enjoy air travel, even the frustrations that can come with it. It is one of the few places remaining in our culture where you are put into contact with people of all sorts outside the curated bubbles we maintain so carefully for ourselves for good and for ill, at least until it is time to plug your ears with the nearest electronic device and take a nap. I remember a flight though a while ago now when I was flying to Tucson and had garnered a set of young tennis players on their way to a tournament by way of seat mates. Being young guys and friends, they had little time for me spare the usual niceties of apologizing for poking each other in the kidneys. But I remember one conversation that they got into in particular on the way, namely a long-winded whining about how slow this all was. They were convinced that 3 or so hours from Minneapolis to Tucson was inconceivable in this day and age and was a rip off. Where was the teleportation? Or at least supersonic travel? It really unreasonable it takes. this. Long. And on it went for about 30 of those minutes along the way.

Spare a brief reflection on the nature of youthful indulgence, what struck me sitting next to them was how abjectly disconnected from any sense of relative history this all was. Here we were, eating lunch at 30000 feet in an air-conditioned tube moving at speeds simply unimagined 60 years previous, and it was still not fast enough? Gone was the buck board, and the weeks on end of dangerous and fought travel to a place that involved a reasonable risk of serious injury just to approach getting there and the big complaint is that we must be uncomfortable for a while. Oh yes; we were also FLYING, a feat that should, really, never cease to amaze us, least we just lose all sense of wonder at the world and its possibilities. Isn't funny how quickly we take even the minor miracles of the universe for granted?

We do the same thing spiritually as well. We can become so used to a world in which we live that we automatically assume that it is the same way with God. We know who we are by where we sit on the airplane, what we do, what we drive, what we earn, how we behave and what we see that we transfer those some expectations to God. We make the way we perform our spiritual lives the expectation of the spiritual life itself and forget the wonder of the creator of the universe coming and calling us, each of us, and wanting to be relationship with us. We make our spirituality about doing because it keeps us about us and where we stand and how we perform

and forget that God comes to us regardless. Of course, we want to live good ethical lives, and do the stuff of faith and service—it is this that makes the world of faith worth while and spreads the kingdom of God to where it is most needed. But all those things, all those choices of being good people can only remain what they are—a response to the God who loved us first and loves us best. We can make the stuff of faith our own god or our own shackle, measuring ourselves by our performance or our lack there of. The faith that justifies us is that at the end of all the behavior and all the prayers is a God that is far more than we can ever imagine or comprehend, welcoming our confessions, inspiring our faithfulness, and calling us ever to do that which is new and now. Time and again, we do well to remind ourselves of that which we always need to hear: our faith is not about us. It is about God.

It is about the God who comes to us in all time and all places and reminds us that we are loved, and in that love calls us to still more. That love is not for who we are or what we do but because we are God's own children—each one. It is about the God who makes himself vulnerable enough to come and dwell with us, know us fully and even die for us just to tell us that there is no place that God is not, or where God cannot be, even in the most sinful soul, or the most righteous practice. It is about the God who does see us solely for that which we do, does not care where we stand in the social order, but stands with all offering grace to each one as they have need, challenge to each one as they have requirement. This parable is an attempt to shift our attention, as it so often needs to be refocused, from ourselves - our piety or our passions, our faith or our failure, our glory or our shame -- to God, the God who delights in justifying the ungodly, welcoming the outcast, and healing all who are in need. It shifts our focus from our limited focus of life to living, to the infinite focus of world made ever new.

May the God of all of our hope, all of our prayer, and all of our lives, bear us up, and bring us to prayer. And in praying, no matter our position, may we be made newly aware of the marvelous, bountiful grace of God in our midst, working still.