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Luke 18:9-14 Coming to Our Senses
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 18:9-14 Common English Bible

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: “Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

For the last few weeks we have been talking about being more aware of our world, coming to our senses as we see God’s presence all around us. This week we hear a story about someone whose mouth gets him into trouble. Without question, the Pharisee is speaking the truth. He isn’t like other people at the temple. He is good and faithful, he fasts, he tithes, he goes to church, he prays. He works hard to live faithfully.

Everything that the Pharisee prays is true, but his arrogance and self-righteousness show through with the words from his mouth, thank you God that I’m not like those other people. The Pharisee is trapped in thinking that God’s love only comes when we follow the rules and do the right things. He uses the law to not only tell him what he should do and who he is but who others are as well. He passes judgment on the tax collector and dismisses him and his whole life as worthless. That is when the Pharisee stopped acting faithfully. We aren’t people who stand in as judge over one another.

When we can let go of our contempt and our judgment, we can minister to one another. My dad and stepmom are Baptists. I remember the first time they came to see me preach. My memory was that my dad told me afterwards that it was good, he said, “you repeated yourself a lot,” which I decided was a compliment. I’m not sure if you are aware of this, but Hallmark or social media has decided October is Pastor Appreciation month. Last week I received a Pastor Appreciation card in the mail from my dad and stepmom and I was in such disbelief I took a picture of it! The front of the card says, “For a special pastor” and inside my stepmom wrote, “We’re so proud of you.” Their concern and words for me forced me to let go of my contempt and judgment. This allowed me to be open to their ministering to me. Is there anyone in your life you have trouble accepting as they are? Is there anyone you are putting in a box as not as good as you are?

This story reminds me that I am called to be humble, to not have contempt for my neighbors, especially the ones who I don’t like. We have something to learn from almost everybody. The other day I learned the importance of slowing down and noticing what is happening around me.

I was at home alone and it was so quiet. It was about 8 in the morning and my dog ran to the front window. One of my new neighbors was walking her dog and the dog was small. I don’t know if the neighbor didn’t realize that her dog had stopped to go to the bathroom or not, but my neighbor did not stop. My neighbor kept on walking, and didn’t notice what was going on around her. Her dog had left a present for me in my front yard. In that split second I realized I had two choices. I could run outside and yell at my new neighbor, or I could not. I’m embarrassed to tell you but I did run outside. As my neighbor was turning the corner, I opened my mouth and yelled something. I said, “Your dog,” but my neighbor didn’t hear me and I went back inside and got a bag to clean up the mess. I thought all day about what I could have done differently. I thought up

all of these possible reasons about why she hadn't stopped. It is so easy for us to make assumptions about people based on very little information. We look down on people because of their politics or their religion or their lifestyle choices. Every moment of the day we have a choice, we can treat one another with love or contempt.

The Pharisee had contempt for the tax collector. The tax collector didn't dream of collecting taxes as his childhood dream, but it was his job to gather the tax that Rome expected. He had a hard job because no one liked him and he knew it. He prays while standing far away from others. He is trapped in his job. We don't know about this particular tax collector but they were known to be corrupt, taking advantage of the weak for their own personal gain, overcharging and exploiting others in order to build up riches for themselves.

As if the tax collector had already passed judgment on himself, he prayed with his head bowed, and as a sign of grief and anguish, he prayed while striking his chest: "God, show mercy to me, a sinner." The tax collector that we meet in this story knows his failing. He knows his need. He knows his absolute dependence on God for all good things, including the gift of mercy. He doesn't vow to leave his profession, but he asks God for mercy. He knows his human failings and his need. He knows his dependence on God's mercy and grace. Jesus says the tax collector is justified. He is right, good, at peace with God simply because Jesus says so. The Pharisee's righteousness was about what he did to follow the law, but the tax collector's being made justified is about what God does. When we are justified, we are restored to right relationship with God because of God's actions not our own.

At the end of the story, Jesus says, "I tell you this person (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee". "Rather than" is the Greek preposition *para* and scholar Amy-Jill Levine points out that *para* can be translated "rather than" or "instead of" but it can also be translated "alongside." That makes a big difference. Jesus says, "I tell you this person (the tax collector) went down to his home justified alongside the Pharisee." After they prayed in the temple, both the Pharisee and the tax collector were justified, receivers of mercy and forgiveness, both made right in relationship with God.

Justification is about God's gift to us. It isn't about a goal that we accomplish or earn or achieve. It is a free gift to be delighted in and shared with joy and abandon. We don't get to decide who is loved by God. All the smug people who drive us crazy receive the same mercy and grace from God that we do. The tax collector and the Pharisee both receive God's mercy and grace. God's behavior, as shown by Jesus, does not meet our definition of fairness. We think God should choose "rather than" or "instead of," not "alongside". Maybe this story isn't about being humble, but it is about God. To show us the way God chooses to behave even in a world like ours, a world full of judgment where we think there is a limited amount of grace and mercy. God chooses to give mercy and forgiveness on both Pharisee and tax collector, saint and sinner, religious leader and scoundrel, one alongside the other, completely ignoring our rules of what is fair or expected or even logical. God chooses to act for both with an unlimited generosity of grace, claiming and saving both, regardless of whether they deserved it or not.

God's name for us is beloved. God hopes that we'll believe God and start to see ourselves as God's beloved rather than think of all of the reasons that we aren't. Do you remember when Jesus said to one of the guys with him that he was a rock even though he knew that this same guy would deny ever knowing Jesus? Jesus was calling something out from inside Peter.

The story shows us that success is never enough. When I live based on my abilities and accomplishments, I am always going to fall short. When I live based on comparisons to how I am doing based on how other people are doing, I am always going to fall short. Success will

never be enough because there is always more. There will always be a sense of doubt. How do we know we are pretty enough, successful enough, or have good enough grades? How do we know if we are righteous enough?

God, show mercy to me, a sinner. God is big enough and loves us enough so that God forgives us, and we should actually believe God. We shouldn't keep feeling bad about all of the times we've messed up because that's ignoring what God said. When we don't trust God's forgiveness, it's like saying we don't believe God is that good. God has forgiven us.

Maybe the goal of life is to simply receive God's acceptance, God's love and God's mercy. To recognize that we are always in need. We all have needs and we can ask God to meet them. Today may we receive God's love and acceptance, like a child receives the love of a parent. You are a gift and the world needs what you have to offer. Self-worth, dignity, purpose, and most especially the people around you, all these are gifts God gives as our adoring parent. And the people around us, those we like and those we don't, are precious children of God deserving of our respect and care. God has called everyone righteous, beloved, holy and perfect. God has already justified you and me.

Today may we see God's unlimited generosity of grace, a grace that loves and chooses people "alongside" not "rather than" or "instead of". Today may we soften our own armor around those with whom we have vehemently disagreed or judged as terribly wrong. May we mirror God's "alongside" instead of the world's preference for "rather than" and "instead of". Amen.