

“Be Satisfied”

Luke 18:9-14

October 27, 2019

Is it OK to admit that I like the Pharisees? Perhaps you wonder how I can make such a statement, when the word Pharisee in the Bible often seems to be a synonym for a legalistic, stiff-necked, self-loving, honour seeking, power-hungry hypocrite? In the Gospels, the Pharisees tend to be the bad guys. They're the ones who say the wrong things, hold the wrong attitude, and want to kill Jesus. Think of the pictures of the Pharisees in your childhood Bible storybooks, they were the shifty-eyed villains.

But were all Pharisees like that? Someone once asked Isaac Asimov why his novels were so successful. He replied it's because he has no villains in his novels. No one, he said, is a villain in her or his own mind.

Although the Pharisees provide the *villains* in some of the parables and Gospel incidents, the Pharisees were actually the good guys in many ways. Unlike the Sadducees, who believed the rich and poor both deserved what they got, and the temple authorities, who wanted to hold onto their positions of power – Pharisees were the pastors for the ordinary people. The system of synagogues and local worship that developed for most of God's people allowed ordinary worshippers to gather to sing Psalms, to read scripture, to hear sermons, and to pray. They served as the heart of every worshipping community.

Pharisees were the champions of the local people. They were the rabbis for local synagogues and probably had the best interests of the people at heart, more than others in first century Judea.

A little aside. Early in my teaching career I was teaching grade 6 and seven social studies geography and history. It was my first year teaching these subjects. The full-time Geography teacher at Hampton Heights was moved to a new school. I asked and was given that assignment for the following year. During the geography teachers' meetings that first year, I felt some animosity from some of the long-time geography teachers who felt they should have been teaching full-time geography instead of grade 7 math and English, and grade 6, 7 and 8 geography. Not all Geography teachers felt this way, but there was one or two.

But, as in every place where hierarchies develop, there were those Pharisees who wanted to preserve their place at the centre of the action. Pharisees were experts in scripture and worship. They had the respect of their local communities. Jesus was more of an expert and, without trying, gained more of the respect of those same communities. No doubt there was jealousy. Probably most Pharisees didn't care. But some did.

People worry when someone tries to turn the world upside down. In his hometown Jesus proclaimed the words of Isaiah: the return of the land to those who had lost it because of the devastating economic situation first century Judea, the cancellation of debts – in short, a reversal of society.

Turnarounds are important. The rise of Mordecai and Esther, the jump for Joseph from prisoner to Pharaoh's counselor, Paul's challenge to the established order when he writes to Philemon about the runaway slave Onesimus, and of course the world-shattering exaltation of Jesus from crucified to Risen Lord are examples of the truth of this scripture.

Oddly enough, when we read this story, we often put ourselves in the place of the tax collector who needs forgiveness; we point our fingers disapprovingly at the Pharisee, who thinks he's doing pretty good with the Lord, thank you very much. Tax collectors were re-viled in the first century Judaea because they cooperated with the occupying Roman army and were seen as collaborators. It would have been hard for anyone in first century Judaea to have any sympathy for one. But Jesus selected one as an apostle, and in this story invites us to sympathize with a person on the margins of society.

And Jesus takes a figure from a respected class and invites us to see him in a less flattering light. I would suggest that the best way to view this story is to look in the mirror and see ourselves as one of the Pharisees – smug, self-satisfied, and certain of our salvation. The fact is, North Americans are among the wealthiest of the world's citizens. The block of stories that includes these parables emphasizes our possessions and how difficult it is to let loose of them sometimes, even in the Lord's work. We should not let ourselves off the hook so easily. We should challenge ourselves as modern-day Pharisees, who want to be on the side of the ordinary people of the world, but who instead support their oppressors with our economic practices.

Where will God find justice? Will God find justice in our churches and in our homes? When was the last time you sat down with your family and discussed economic justice when you considered shopping, vacation travel, or stewardship? When was the last time you asked if you are making decisions that matter, that favour those who are oppressed, that threaten to turn the world upside down?

Jesus said, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). Laugh at the Pharisee if you want. But then ask yourself if you are on the side of those who are marginalized, oppressed, or downtrodden – who all are God's children.