

“The Pharisee and the Tax Collector”

Date: August 11, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Deuteronomy 26:1-15; Luke 18:9-14

Occasion: Short Stories by Jesus, series

Themes: Judaism, humility, grace

For several weeks we have been looking at the parables of Jesus, doing so through the eyes of a Jewish rabbi, Amy-Jill Levine. I was especially looking forward to this parable to see what she would have to say, because from my perspective the Pharisee is obviously an arrogant and pompous religious leader who needed to be taken down a notch. How would she interpret this obvious attack on one of her own?

She did not disappoint me. She caused me to look at this from a totally different perspective. I don't know that I agree with her on every point, and I'm not asking you to agree with her completely. I am going to ask you to listen with an open mind, because we have so many preconceived ideas of what this parable means.

She devotes about 30 pages of her book to this parable, so I can't tell you everything she has to say. What I'd like to do is pick out some of the more interesting pieces and then see what conclusions we might draw.

She introduces the chapter this way: “Two fellows go up to the Temple to pray – one righteous and one sinful; one is honored as a popular leader and a respected teacher, and one is despised as a traitor to his people and a collaborator with the Roman government. One, who has an abundance of good deeds, prays a prayer of thanksgiving, and the other, a self-identified sinner, simply asks for mercy.”

“We have here two conventional types, the upright and the fallen. Because Jesus's story is a parable and because parables do the unexpected, we might expect a reversal of roles – the sinner turns out to be

the saint and the saint turns out to be evil. And that is how the parable has traditionally been understood. Ironically, this expectation is in part what the parable is trying to prevent. The saint is not a sinner, the sinner is not a saint, and our conventional reading about a reversal of roles is *not* what the parable ultimately means.

For many Christian readers, the Pharisee – the one who in his own context would have been regarded as righteous and respected – is instead seen as a negative figure, wallowing in hypocritical sanctimoniousness. Conversely, the tax collector – a sinful traitor to his country, ends up being the justified hero.

But that would not have been how it was seen or heard in Jesus' time. Pharisees were well-respected, even revered. The tax collector was considered a vile turn-coat, helping Rome to collect taxes on his own people, and probably cheating people while he did it. Rabbi Levine sees a great deal of negativity toward the Jewish people in Luke's gospel, and Pharisees are often a target of his criticism. But that is not how they would have been seen in Jesus' time.

What is unexpected in this parable is the tax collector showing up in the Temple. He was a traitor to his people; the government, for which he worked, the Roman Empire, used the Temple as its personal bank. The tax collector works for the government that abuses the Temple system.

First century Jews would have been wondering, is this man going to use the Temple as his own personal bank, making an automatic withdrawal of forgiveness? There would have been an air of suspicion and incredulity.

Acknowledging sin and asking for mercy are both commendable actions. But if they are not accompanied by a resolve to stop sinning, they prompt cheap grace. Is he sincere? Will he change? Or is it just for show?

Our tax collector is in the Temple, praying. Jesus has given us an image that unsettles.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, would have been a respected teacher, who walked the walk as well as he talked the talk. They were the teachers of their time, and the moral example for their people. Rabbi Levine says, "It is easy to compare them to members of your own congregation who seem to be judgmental, bigoted, stuck in the mud, or otherwise unable to hear the "good news" as the pastor understands it. But the reaction of the congregation should not be 'Thank God, I'm not like those Pharisees.'"

But what about the Pharisee's prayer - isn't it self-righteous congratulation? Rabbi Levine says how we assess the Pharisee may tell us more about ourselves than about him. Whatever conclusions we draw, we should note that the prayer is still to God and gratitude is still expressed to God.

Rabbi Levine suggests that rather than being arrogant, the Pharisee is expressing sincere gratitude to God for being able to be a faithful Jew. It was God who enabled him to know the difference between right and wrong. It was God's grace which enabled him to study Torah instead of having to work, so that he could know what the Lord expects of him.

She compares the Pharisee's prayer to the prayer in Deuteronomy 26, which we read earlier. The worshiper stands before God and in this holy moment speaks to God of the kind of person he is. He confesses that he has done what God expects of him; he has been faithful.

Our Pharisee has even gone above and beyond what is required. Rabbi Levine tells us that the fasting he describes is nowhere commanded in the Torah. What we have here is a description of a saint, who has done

not only what is expected of him, but even more. For the first-century Jew, Jesus' description of this Pharisee would have been taken as a humorous characterization of a saintly person. He would not have been seen as a person of scorn or dislike. (Let's move on).

The tax collector prays, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." Rabbi Levine observes that we have no reason to doubt his sincerity. He bravely entered the Temple, where he knew that other worshipers might regard him as a traitor and an extorter. He admits his sin and his need for mercy.

This is where the parable catches Jesus' audience. They would be forced to allow for the possibility that a tax collector could be righteous. God's grace could cover even this man's sin. Unsettling.

Then, to conclude the parable Luke has Jesus offer this pronouncement: "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Rabbi Levine critiques this translation and the meaning we have come to understand by it.

She says, the standard reading is that the tax collector receives the gift of grace, while the Pharisee, trying to earn his own righteousness, finds no favor or justice. The problem with this point of view is that it prompts exactly the same type of dualistic, judgmental system that Jesus speaks against.

For it suggests this response: "Thank you, God, that I'm not like that Pharisee." Once we negatively judge one character and promote the other, the parable traps. We're as guilty as we're accusing the Pharisee of being.

Rabbi Levine sheds light on the parable by bringing to our attention the translation of a certain word, on which the whole thing swings. The preposition is "para" in Greek. It can be translated as "rather than" This one

is blessed *rather than* that one. However, it also has other translations. It could also mean “because of” or “on account of.” This one is blessed “on account of” that one. The tax collector is blessed, *on account of* the righteousness of the Pharisee.

Or, it could be translated as “to set side by side.” We have these words in English: paradox, parallel, parable. One thing is alongside of another. The tax collector went away justified, alongside of the Pharisee. We have seen that the Pharisee has more good deeds, a greater store of protection, than he could need. First century Jews might have concluded that the tax collector had tapped into the merit of the Pharisee.

If keeping company with so-called bad people can change a person, is it not the same thing that an evil person could become better by association with a good person? It is precisely this transfer of good deeds that, in one way, we can understand Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus’ faithfulness is what allows others to be justified.

Well, at the end of the hour we may have more questions than answers. And that is the purpose of a good parable. Is the Pharisee praising God or praising himself? Is the tax collector trusting in God’s mercy or playing a game? Will he keep his day job and continue to sin, or will he make restitution for his sins and find another line of work?

Who should we identify with? The Pharisee who strives to do good and does more than expected, and maybe is a little proud about it? Or is it the tax collector, who as far as we know has done nothing for the benefit of the community, but who at least seems sincere in his request?

Here’s the thing about this parable. Listen, this is important. Once we judge one better than the other, we are trapped by the parable. And if we dismiss them both, we are trapped as well, for most of us are not as good

as the Pharisee, nor as sinful as the tax collector. However, God's grace is wide enough to forgive the sins of all of us – the so-called righteous, the so-called sinner, and all those in between. Thank God for mercy. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing, NY, NY, 2014, "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector," pp. 183-212.