

Message for October 16, 2022

Luke 18:9-14

I recently read something written by the well-respected New Testament scholar Dan Via, that really caught my attention. He says that in many ways the parables and stories that Jesus told are like a window into the mind of God himself. If we want to know what God is like and what he thinks, then all we have to do is consider the stories that Jesus told. We can use the Parable of the Prodigal Son as an example; that story tells us that no matter what we ever say or do and no matter how far we may stray from him and his ways, God loves us and will always take us back. But, says Via, the parables are not just a window into the mind of God, the parables can also act as a mirror as well. This is to say, when we stand in front of a window and look out, we don't just see what is beyond, sometimes we also catch a glimpse of ourselves in it as well. And so it is with the stories of Jesus. Sometimes the stories offer a window into our souls, even if we don't always like what we see. That is certainly something that the parable in today's scripture passage does.

One day Jesus told a story about two men who went to the Temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee and his prayer was a testimonial to himself and how good he was:

"God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

The prayer of the second man however was totally different. He was a tax collector and far from praising himself, all he did was tell God how sorry he was for all the things that he had done wrong. And he had a lot to be sorry for too since he was a dishonest crook who helped the hated Romans oppress his own people. But, Jesus asked, which of the two men had the right relationship with God? The answer was obvious, as is the moral of the story. Don't be self-righteous like the Pharisee, rather be a humble penitent like the tax collector. The moral of the story seems to be so simple ... or is it?

Most of us usually think of the Pharisees as being the 'bad guys' and this is perfectly natural; after all, the gospels are full of references to Jesus arguing with the Pharisees and criticizing them, saying that they were little more than rule-obsessed hypocrites who had lost sight of what their religion was all about.

To think this way though isn't totally fair. Yes, the Pharisees were sometimes hypocritical and yes, sometimes they did get carried away with reducing religion to nothing more than following a set of rules. What we also have to realize however is that the Pharisees were *the* religious people of their day. They were the ones who took God and their faith seriously. Even the Pharisee in today's lesson was, despite his unattractive self-righteousness, a good person. He fasted, worshiped, and tithed, giving away a tenth of all his income to the Temple and other charities. He really was a good man but even so, he was the one who was alienated or separated from God. He was because of his pride and righteousness but even more so, he was because of his failure to love. He looked at the tax collector and saw nothing more than a sinner and so a person to be despised. The Pharisee felt no sympathy or love for his fellow worshiper and that is why he was condemned. Tragically the fact that he did not love outweighed all of the good that he had done.

We may not realize it but we here today are the modern-day Pharisees, and I mean this in a positive sense. We are the ones who, in contrast to most people today, quite consciously strive to take God and our religion seriously. We are the ones for example who make the effort to worship God. In a society where the vast majority of people give little if anything to charity, we by comparison are the generous ones. Study after study shows that church attenders are far more likely to support charities than non-church goers. Study after study also shows that in a society where most people tend to not be involved in the life of their community, it is the regular church attenders who are often the volunteers in other community-oriented organizations. Without being egotistical about it, we are the good people; we are in the best sense of the word, modern day Pharisees. But, unlike that Pharisee in today's scripture passage, we must be careful that we do not lose sight of what our religion and faith are about, and that is love; love of God and love of neighbors. If we do not love then it doesn't matter how good, righteous, generous, or religious we are. St. Paul knew this which is why he wrote:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Take the love away and what are we left with? We will have missed the point of what our faith is all about. This was recently brought home to me by a current storyline on a TV show.

The show that I am talking about is “Young Sheldon” and it is about the early years of one of the principal characters in another sit-com, “The Big Bang Theory”. In the show Sheldon’s mother, Mary Cooper, is very religious and was very involved in the life of her church. Mary for example worked part time in the church office, hosted a Bible Study Group, and volunteered with the Youth Group as well. In the current storyline her eldest son Georgie and his girlfriend find out that they are going to be parents. Now even though this is just a TV show, what I find troubling is the reaction of the church members to this. Mary was asked to give up her job at the church and the members of the Bible Study Group also stopped coming to her house for their usual sessions. Then one Sunday morning she, accompanied by Sheldon and his sister Missy, mustered up the courage to go to church. From the moment they entered they were shunned and a woman in their pew made an obvious effort to slide down it to get away from them. The preacher spoke about the love of God and that was followed by a prayer. The custom in that church was for everyone to hold hands during the prayer but the woman closest to Mary made a point of offering her hand to a person sitting in the pew behind her. Utterly humiliated, Mary and the kids got up and left. Later in the day the preacher, well aware of what was going on, dropped by and expressed the hope that she would not leave the church. Mary’s response was to say that she hadn’t left God, but she felt that God had left her. With that she shut the door in the preacher’s face.

Now this of course is just a fictional TV show set twenty years ago but nevertheless it raises a troubling issue. The church stands for God in the eyes of so many people, but how are we Christians, more often than not, portrayed in the media? Indeed what is the popular image of a Christian or even the church? Are we perceived to be a warm, caring people or are we viewed as being rather harsh and judgemental? Now of course we may well say that this is all just a stereotype but perhaps we ought to ask ourselves; if we or a family member is in trouble and we feel embarrassed about it, are the people in church the first people that we would turn to for help and support? Or would the people in church be the last people that we would want to know about it? As a person

once rather bitterly said, the church is the one army in the world that shoots its own wounded.

We may not like it but rightly or wrongly the church is perceived by far too many people to be too much like the Pharisee in today's scripture passage. As I have already said, it doesn't matter how good or righteous the church is, if we do not love *everyone* than we have missed the point of our faith altogether. Love of God and others, regardless of who they are, what they are, or where they are is what the church, if it would truly be the church, is all about. And of course no one has ever described what love is like, better than St. Paul.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

This is a wonderful description and even *the* description of what we can and should be like as the disciples of Christ and the people of God. Indeed if we really want to know what we as Christians should be like, then all we have to do is take this passage and substitute our own name and even the name of our church family in place of the word love. And if we love as St. Paul describes it then we and the very church itself, unlike that so good and yet so wrong Pharisee of long ago, will not lose sight of what religion and ultimately life itself is all about.

Pastoral Prayer

Hear us we pray as we once again bow our heads and lift up our hearts to you in prayer this autumn morning.

On this Sunday after Thanksgiving, we give you thanks for the beauty and goodness of this season of change and colour. We thank you for all the people, with us and with you, who love us and whom we love. We thank you for the food that nourishes our bodies and all that nourishes our minds and souls.

We thank you for this nation in which we live, even if we sometimes take it for granted. We thank you for the rights and freedoms that we have, including

the right to elect those who make the laws. With the upcoming municipal election in mind, we thank you for all of the candidates who are willing to stand for office.

We thank you for our call to be your Son's disciples and to be a part of his body here on earth. May we, secure in your love and forgiveness, try our best to live up to our calling. We pray for the work of your church, both near and far, that both she and we may be fitting tools in the workshop of your world.

We offer up our prayer of concern for your world. As the fighting intensifies in Ukraine, we pray for the people of that nation and that there may be a true and just peace.

We pray for the families, friends, and colleagues of the two police officers killed in the line of duty this past week. We thank you for all of the first responders whose job it is to serve and protect, even at the risk of their own lives. We pray for their safety and well-being.

We pray this day for the well-being of all your children this Sunday morning. We pray for those who mourn and those who are ill, that they may find the peace and healing that only you can give.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen