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**The Ways of Jesus: The Humility of Pride**

**The Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

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“Literal” is a word folks like to use to describe the Bible. And they like to pair this phrase with other words like infallible and “of God.” “The literal, infallible word of God.” And then they like to say that because it is those things, the Bible is not open for interpretation. It must be understood literally. Well friends, I am here to tell you, deciding to interpret the Bible literally, is an interpretation choice. An impossible one, but a choice, nonetheless. This idea has come up over and over this week.

And it’s funny to me really, especially since I would guess not very many of us would be able to read the Bible in its original language. This is a room of highly educated people. How many of us can read the Hebrew Bible in Hebrew? How many can read the New Testament in Greek? There is the first problem with claiming to interpret the Bible literally. The people who translated it from those original languages to English made interpretational choices before we even open the book. That’s why it’s good to know a little something about the translation you read and study. All of this to say, of course the Bible is open for interpretation. It is a collection of different literary genres: stories, poems, parables, letters, even songs. It employs many literary devices, such as euphemisms, allusion, imagery, and foreshadowing. Each genre and each literary device require interpretation to understand what it meant in its original context and what it might mean for us today.

In this series, we are looking at parables. Jesus used parables to communicate his unique vision of God and his understanding of human beings and the world. Parables sometimes read like riddles, leaving us scratching our heads, saying, “huh?” They sometimes contain humor or biting sarcasm. Always they use what is ordinary to communicate something extraordinary.

Before we get to today’s parable, I want to talk for a minute about a familiar parable that has a similar message, the parable of the Helpful (Good) Samaritan which is told in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10. In that story, a man is robbed, beaten, and left alone by the side of the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The first two passersby, whom the original audience would have expected to stop and help the man because they represented the established religion, walked by, without so much as a “Hey, as soon as I charge my phone, I will call 911 for you.” In fact, both went out of their way to avoid the hurt man, even crossing over to the other side of the road. As an aside, this parable is the basis of an old joke people like to tell to poke fun at clergy: Do you know why the priest didn't cross the road to the wounded traveler? He could see that he had already been robbed.”

Back to the story…the third person to pass by was a Samaritan. Samaritans were not well thought of by their Jewish neighbors. In fact, it’s likely that when the original audience heard this story, the entrance of a Samaritan to the storyline would have caused them to assume things were only going to get worse for the injured man. Instead, it was the Samaritan who helped him. That would have been an unexpected turn in the plotline and shocking for anyone who was Jewish to hear. A Samaritan? Behaving better than the pious Jewish man?

In the same way Jesus’ original audience was surprised at the turn of events in the parable of the Samaritan, Jesus’ audience would have been surprised when they heard the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The audience would have expected the actions of the religious law-following Pharisee to be exemplary, but, once again, that is not what happened. This is Luke 18: 10-14a.

**10**“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11**The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12**I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ **13**But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ **14**I tell you this man went down to his home justified rather than the other…”

Reflecting on this parable with the benefit of 2000 years of scholarship and hindsight, we aren’t as shocked as the original audience would have been that the tax collector went back home justified. That word “justified” is kind of churchy, so let’s use the word “accepted.” The tax collector went home and things between he and God were okay. We aren’t shocked by the outcome, partially because when we try to find ourselves in this story, we see ourselves more like the tax collector, not because our chosen vocations force us to defraud our neighbors like the tax collectors of the first century Roman Empire. But more so because we are definitely not like the Pharisee, being all judge-y and full of ourselves. We aren’t the ones patting ourselves on the back and pointing fingers at “those people over there.” And honestly, lately, it seems like **we** are the ones who are being pointed at and judged.

At least that’s how it has felt to me the last couple of weeks. Every year in the run up to Pride, the church receives hateful messages. “Good Christians” call to tell me I’m a heretic and an apostate. They tell me I am leading y’all to hell and every time I turn around someone is trying to tell me what the Bible says because clearly, I have never read it. If I had, I would know the rules and I would know better than to say out loud that homosexuality is not a sin (it’s not) and that Jesus’ message was more about inclusion and love than it was about believing all the right things and doing all the right things (it is). They say I don’t take the Bible seriously like they do, and by extension, neither do you. They are the Pharisees in this story. The last thing I want is to be lumped into the same category as “those people.”

But I’ve given myself away. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people…” That’s not the tax collector speaking, friends, that is the Pharisee. Maybe I am as shocked by this story as the original audience was. But it isn’t because I am surprised that God aligned Godself with the tax collector. I am surprised that I am more like the Pharisee than I want to admit. To be clear, the Pharisees were not bad people. In fact, in the story, this Pharisee went above and beyond. Jewish law prescribed only one annul day of fasting, yet he fasted two days a week, presumably as intercession for the people’s sin. Secondly, he gave tithes of everything he bought, ensuring he used nothing that had not been properly tithed. Things like corn, new wine, and oil should already have been tithed by the producer, so his tithing of even those things was voluntary self-denial: to his personal offering he added the agricultural tithe. He was doing all the right things.

If that is true, why did the Pharisee end up sideways with God; why wasn’t his prayer acceptable? I think maybe the Pharisee got in his own way. It seems like the Pharisee’s high opinion of himself caused him to compare the tax collector’s life with his, judging him all the while. He made his life the yardstick by which he would judge everyone else. This comparison and judgment created a chasm between the tax collector and the Pharisee. They were in the same temple, but worlds apart. The vice of judgmentalism leads to alienation from other people through (often mutual) suspicion, the virtue of nonjudgmentalism, on the other hand, functions, according to philosopher and theologian, Keith Ward, as a “commitment to seeing the best in people.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What would it take for us to make a commitment to seeing the best in people, I wondered this week. My experience is, to see the best in other people, we must be able to see the best in ourselves first. The pharisee had no problem seeing what was best in himself, but he hadn’t learned how to allow that to help him see the best in other people, specifically other people who didn’t measure up to his standards.

This parable has reminded me that there is a little bit of Pharisee and a little bit of tax collector in each of us. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, commenting on this parable wrote, “Consider how much more evil and good, creativity and selfishness, are mixed up in real life than our moralists, whether they be Christian or secular, realize.” What he meant is, we are complicated. In her book, *Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi,* scholar Amy-Jill Levine, encourages Christians to see the Pharisee characters in the gospels not as representing some or anyone Jewish because it feeds antisemitism—but instead to consider what it is about the Pharisees in the stories that hits a little too close to home.[[2]](#footnote-2) And as a critic of the misuse of religion, I feel like Jesus would have gotten behind that. I don’t think he would have wanted his followers to be jerks. Jesus had a way of seeing people for who they were created to be, even though we are all still very much a work in progress.

That’s why I love Pride. It’s a celebration of people learning to see the fabulousness in themselves. It’s a celebration of human beings becoming who they were created to be. And my experience with the colorful, diverse beloveds in the LGBTQIA+ community is that their journey of learning to see the beauty within themselves has taught them well how to see the beauty in other people. What I observe at Pride celebrations, even the Pride worship service we hosted here Thursday night, is a special energy that I have not experienced in other settings.

It reminds me, albeit in very contexts, of what I have heard Rev. Tari Carbaugh say to the Wednesday yoga class, “Namaste…the divine light in me sees the divine light in you.” I looked up the meaning of namaste and I read that its literal translation (yes, sometimes literal is good) is “I humbly bow to you.” At Pride events, without exception, there is a mutual seeing of one another combined with deep humility that says, “There is nobody in the world besides you who can be you. And there is nobody in the world, besides me who can be me. Let’s figure it out together. I will celebrate you and you will celebrate me.” The overwhelming feeling I have after every Pride celebration I’ve ever been to is, why can’t life just be like this? Why can’t everyday be a celebration and acknowledgement of the gift we are to one another?

It believe it can be. But it must start with each one of us seeing the beauty in ourselves. And then we must allow that beauty to see the beauty in everyone else. The divine light in me sees the divine light in you. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector reminds us that, even when we can’t see the beauty in someone else, especially when we can’t see the beauty in someone else, God sees it, accepts it, and loves it. Look for the beauty that God sees, friends, and start with the beauty in the mirror. Amen.

1. Ward, Keith, (2011), *The Philosopher and the Gospels: Jesus Through the Lens of Philosophy*, Lion Hudson, Oxford. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Levine, Amy-Jill, (2014), *Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, HarperOne, New York [↑](#footnote-ref-2)