

***SERMON 23 OCTOBER 2022, Luke 18:9-14***

***THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR***

I was seconded by the Pacific regional women of the Council for World Mission to rescue them from their 12 months of inactivity. I was asked to create a project for Pacific women. The person charged with the task of doing this over the previous 12 months namely the convenor had done nothing about it. And so, I was called upon at the last minute to put something together as the budget for this deadline was closing the next day. Little did I know that I was stepping into dangerous territory.

The next day after working on their project and proposal I was invited to present it to the Pacific regional gathering. I sat up front to present and very shortly after my presentation a Samoan minister from American Samoa began by asking “who are you?” In Samoan culture this is very rude. He is literally saying, what rock did you crawl out from under, or I was something he scraped off the bottom of his shoe. That is how I took it. The fact of the matter is that he knew me very well, I was invited to his home in American Samoa, and we had lunch together, I borrowed his Ph.D. thesis on a visit and spent a couple of afternoons reading it meeting him each time I returned it. So, he knew very well who I was, and each visit was an amicable one with him and his wife.

I was shocked at his bluntness and rudeness in front of the whole Pacific region, what had I done to deserve this? Unfortunately, my body reacted involuntary, and the tears started pouring out of my eyes I had no control to the point that I sat there with my head bowed almost as if

in shame. I said nothing. Poor Rev. Chris Nichol was chairing the meeting at the time, and he didn't quite know how to move forward from this. In the end, I just got up from my seat and left the room. Whatever his reasons were for talking to me like that was no excuse, "who are you?" is offensive and rude in any language.

I felt like the tax collector, I felt looked down upon and a nobody. I ended up boycotting the rest of the conference. I went and had a massage; swam in the pool and did my own thing after all I was not a member of the regional council I was seconded to do a job and that is exactly what I did. In actual fact the woman who seconded me, literally threw me under the bus because she did not do her job and so the "who are you" was actually meant to be "why you and where are those who were tasked with this job?" It could have been done much more respectfully. A couple of years later I applied for the role as Pacific Regional Secretary for the Council for World Mission which meant that I now became the leader and had a more positive impact on what happened within the Pacific region and the place of women in those gatherings. The American Samoan minister was the Pharisee, and I was the tax collector. I understand the tax collector's humiliation.

This lesson assigned for this Sunday consists of the parable of the two men who go to the Temple to pray. According to Bill Loader,<sup>i</sup> this parable has given rise to stereotyping of Pharisees so that 'pharisaic' has come to mean by definition something very negative: a 'holier than thou' attitude. This is unfortunate and certainly unfair to Pharisees. It may even be more typical of many Christians than it was of the historical

Pharisees. It is nevertheless a very eloquent parable which conveys its message powerfully.

It is very hard not to approach the parable with the words: 'Thank God, I am not like this Pharisee!' History has us stand in the wrong place so that the story is subverted. We become 'pharisaic' about the Pharisees or worse, we stand in a tradition which confuses not just Pharisees but Jews in general, a stance which has had horrific consequences. We need therefore to make a special effort to reposition ourselves if we are to come close to hearing the parable as it might have been intended.

Loader continues, Luke prepares the way. The parable, he reports, was told to those who were very sure of themselves and disparaged others. We describe this commonly as self righteousness. It is interesting that it follows a common tendency to define oneself by defining others. This is already an unhealthy move. Instead of grappling with our own identity or looking at ourselves we focus on what makes us better than others. Such a stance means that to respect ourselves we need to 'beat' others, run them down. It is a game people play: suring up group identity by joining in a chorus of condemnation of others: 'aren't they awful!?!'. It is a kind of fellowship of disparagement which gives those who indulge in it a sense of closeness: standing together against a common enemy. It is common at war time or times of crisis. It is also common in daily life; it is the joy of gossip.

Perhaps the Pharisee is standing on his own; perhaps he is portrayed as speaking with regard to himself. Might his opening statement be

innocent? This seems unlikely. The parable appears to assume that it is distasteful for anyone to claim to be superior to others.

The tax collector takes a stance which contrasts with that of the Pharisee. He keeps his distance. Partly this indicates that he feels he lacks a claim on divine space. Partly it reflects that people would not have wanted him near anyway. His stance is one of shame. His actions express shame. His words call for mercy, using a word which comes from the language of sacrificial penitence. This is doubtless intended. The effect is to underline Jesus' claim that what the temple system was designed to produce happened for this man; it did not happen for the Pharisee. Jesus is reflecting a common Jewish theme that there is something more important than the rites of sacrifice: the contrite heart. Jesus is not being anti temple but expressing a sentiment which his hearers would have recognised and affirmed. The tax collector puts himself in a posture of contrition and remorse. He stands at a distance, cannot bring himself to look up toward heaven, and pounds his chest. Interestingly, the breast-beating is a traditional gesture of women in the Middle East and is practiced by men only when in deep anguish.

Apart from the cultic language in the man's prayer, we also find the word 'justified' and 'just' or 'righteous'. The man had sorted out his relationship with God. He had entered a right relationship with God because he was prepared to come with no bargaining chips but simply the willingness to receive God's love. The Pharisee was not in such a right relationship, although he was convinced he was.

The story is meant to be subversive. It deals with self righteousness. It goes a little further than that in that it connects such self righteousness with an understanding of religion which serves to reinforce the self assuredness. Religion can be very dangerous. It can produce self delusion. It can lead people to do terrible things; or better, people can use it to inspire themselves to do terrible things like the Christchurch mosque massacres. But the collusion with self-delusion comes in many other forms. It is there where Christians are thanking God they are not like 'those Muslims'. It is there where individuals and communities are defining their identity by their enemies and in the process, like the Pharisee, refusing to see their own faults and failings.

The message of Jesus is quite sharp: bolstering one's sense of identity by disparaging others (even when they are terrible people) so easily leads to illusions of grandeur and a failure to see ourselves as we really are. It is a kind of goodies and baddies game. The answer is not to pretend the tax collector has done no wrong, but to accept our common humanity and to know that our real value is in loving and accepting ourselves as God loves us and not upping our value by downing others. The tax collector is also a person of worth. When we do so we will have so much more time and space and energy for compassion, both receiving and giving it. 'Pharisees' need it - as much as tax collectors.

The closing comment declares that the tax collector's prayer is accepted by God, attesting to the paradox that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. The tax collector's petition is simple "God be merciful to me" He personifies the

one essential prerequisite for prayer – an honest recognition of our place before the justice and mercy of God. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Bill Loader, Lectionary Resources Pentecost 20