

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 27, 2013

"Jesus Loves Sinners."

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus continually shocks us. No wonder the people of his own day crucified him. He wouldn't be too popular in our community. At least not among the better people in town. It is almost as if he preferred to associate with the rejects, the rubble of humanity. "Two men went up to pray," he said on one occasion, "a Pharisee and a tax collector." Now the audience was supposed to hiss and boo when the title of the tax collector was given. The IRS is not too popular with us, but at least most of the men and women who work there, are honorable. I said most... Not so with the tax collectors in Jesus' day. They were worse than scoundrels. They collaborated with the enemy the government of Rome. They worked on commission. The more they could gouge out of their clients, the more they could pocket for themselves. Pharisees get a bad press in the New Testament, but there were some fine, caring Pharisees. But the tax collector, that's another story.

Yet when Jesus tells his story the tax collector comes off as a hero. It begins with the Pharisee praying his famous prayer, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get." Our first response may be that this is not a bad prayer. The Pharisee wasn't like the riffraff of society, and thank God for it! I am thankful for the kind of values that have been instilled in me, aren't you? Some of us could pray the Pharisee prayer with some justification.

But listen to the prayer of the tax collector. Standing far off, he would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but he beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." I can almost see him, can't you? No illusions. No pretense. He knows what he is and what he's done. He is so ashamed that he cannot even look toward heaven. His prayer is an honest one. "Be merciful to me, a sinner."

Jesus said the tax collector went back to his house justified, but the Pharisee did not. Why? The answer is found in the crowd Jesus was talking to. Verse 9 is the key. Listen to this revealing description of the crowd Jesus was addressing. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others..." The kind of moral he was drawing was determined by the audience to whom he was speaking. If he had been speaking to a group of tax collectors, the Pharisee might have been the hero. But he was telling this parable to a group "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others..." That makes all the difference in the world.

Jesus likes sinners, first of all because they know they still have room to grow. Notice again the description of Jesus' audience: "Some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous..." These were the folks who thought that they had already arrived, those who considered themselves part of the spiritual elite. Nobody likes people who are smug, sneering, self-important.

John Brodie, former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, was once asked why a superstar like himself should have to hold the ball for field goals and points after touchdowns. "Well," said Brodie, "if I didn't, the ball would fall over." No false pride. No obnoxious pretense. Brodie understood his place in the scheme of things. He was probably a very coachable player.

There is no hope for people who think they have already arrived. Why should I bother to enter this pulpit every Sunday morning if you think you already know everything you need to know about Christ and faith? What a waste of my time and yours. Jesus came into the world to

introduce people to a new reality. There was no need for him to waste his precious time with persons who thought they already knew it all.

Jesus likes sinners, in the second place, because they don't look down on others. Notice what else Jesus says about his audience: "Some who trusted themselves that they were righteous and despised others." That's what happens, isn't it? Someone once said, "The trouble oftentimes with religious people is that they try to be more spiritual than God himself." And when that happens we begin to look down on others.

There is an old story about a senior pastor at a large metropolitan church who entered the sanctuary one day, knelt at the altar, and prayed, "Oh, God, I am the worst of sinners. I am nothing. I am a worm." Over and over he repeated these degrading words. He associate walked by and was very impressed by the senior pastor's humility. He knelt down beside him and also prayed, "Oh, Lord, I am the worst of sinners. I am nothing. I am a worm." While the two pastors were praying, the custodian happened to walk by and overhear them. Impressed, he went in, knelt beside them, and repeated the same prayer: "Oh, Lord, I too, am the worst of sinners, I am nothing. I am a worm." The associate pastor stopped praying, looked over at the custodian, then with his nose turned upward, he turned to the senior pastor and whispered, "Look who thinks he's nothing." The Pharisee may have been superior to the tax collector in every way. but as soon as he began looking down his nose at the tax collector, it was lost.

Jesus likes sinners, in the third place, because they know they must depend on God. Looking at the same verse again, "Some trusted in themselves that they were righteous..." These self-righteous folks didn't trust God for their salvation. They trusted themselves and their good works. We still do that. In the very first of the Ninety-five Theses, Martin Luther reminded all Christians that we are to rely on God, not on our own righteousness, for our salvation. How quickly we forget.

Of course, Luther, himself didn't do better. Two decades after he had nailed his theses on the church door at Wittenberg, he confessed that he still felt the old dirt clinging to him of wanting to deal with God in such a way that he could contribute something to his own salvation. He didn't trust God. He couldn't get it into his head the he was saved through sheer grace and that what was needed was to completely surrender daily to that grace.

It was that same message of diving grace that warmed John Wesley's heart in a little room on Aldersgate Street. In fact, he was listening to the words of Martin Luther concerning salvation by faith alone when he had the life transforming experience.

The Pharisee could not see that all his righteousness was like filthy rags in the presence of the righteousness of God. We can never be righteous enough to merit God's love. That love is freely given. Those who know themselves to be sinners know that they must depend on God.

This brings me to the last thing to be said, Jesus likes sinners, because there is no one else to like. We are all sinners. Let no one in this room brag before God about his righteousness. None of us are righteous. No not one! And that's why we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus likes sinners. There is no one else to like, for that is where we all are.

So, a Pharisee and a tax collector went up to pray. One was a thief and a traitor. The other was one of the best people in town, but both were sinners. The Pharisee thought he had already arrived. So, no further growth was possible. He looked down on those who were not as far along as he. He depended on himself and his own good works rather than on the grace of God. A Pharisee and a tax collector. Both were sinners, but only one of them was aware of it.

Fortunately, Jesus likes sinners. How do we know that? Because it was for sinners that he died. Jesus likes sinners. And I'm glad he does. Aren't you? Amen.