

“Humble Truth”

Many of us grew up reading or hearing about Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. If you grew up around the time I did, or before, you knew it as the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. As a child, I had no idea what a publican was, except that he was a bad character generally, except not in this story. A publican, for those of you who still don’t know, is one who operates a “public house,” an establishment that dispenses wine, ale, and other potent potables; in short, he is a bartender. The contemporary character most like a publican would have to be the owner of Moe’s on The Simpsons. But Publican, while obviously revealing some bias of the translators of the King James Version, was not the best word to use for the Greek *τελωνες* (*telones*), so we have in our translation this morning “tax collector.”

You must remember that a tax collector was a crook. He was a person who, as a Jew, worked for the Roman government. He had a franchise, an area in which he was entitled to collect taxes. He was told by the Romans what he owed them; anything else he made over and above that was his to pocket. The tax collectors were despised as turncoats and thieves. So Jesus has set you up. He has sent in the Pharisee who was one of the most respectable people in Judaism of his time and He has sent into the temple with him this tax collector who is a mafia-style enforcer, a truly bad apple.

The Pharisee stands by himself and he prays and he says, *“God, I thank you that I am not like other people. I am not a thief. I am not a rogue. I am not an adulterer. I am certainly not like this tax collector over here. I fast twice a week. I give away a tenth of my income.”* That’s his speech. He goes on interminably like that. Then the tax collector just stands there (he won’t even look up to the heaven; he looks at his shoe tips) and says, ***“God be merciful to me, a sinner.”*** Then Jesus says, ***“I tell you this man (the tax collector) went to his house justified rather than the other (the Pharisee) for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who***

humble themselves will be exalted.” That is the story.

Robert Farrar Capon writes, “*Like all of Jesus’ parables, it should carry a warning which is ‘this will be hazardous to all your previous opinions about how religion works and how God works.’ Jesus’ parables are designed to outrage the hearers and to shock and to show how God has stood almost all of our values on their heads.*”

What this parable is about is not, as it seems to say at the end, the virtue of humility. The Pharisee’s problem is not that he is showing off. It is that he really believes that his stack of good deeds is enough to save himself. And he believes it is enough if only everyone else would do what he does — that is enough to save the whole world.

What God really says in Christ is that human goodness isn’t good enough to do that trick. Human goodness cannot reconcile the world. Basically if the world could have been reconciled by good advice from God, to which human goodness would respond, the world’s problems would have been solved ten minutes after Moses got down to the bottom of Mt. Sinai with the commandments. Everyone would have read the commandments and said, “*Oh, yes, of course,*” and the problem would have been over. The trouble with the commandments is the commandments are fine, but no one has ever paid that much attention to them.

The law, the commandments, are efforts at morality, humility, spirituality and, above all, they are efforts at religion, efforts at trying to do something that will get us right with God. All of them do not work. Therefore God, as Jesus speaks of Him, doesn’t risk trying to save the world by human good behavior. The Pharisee’s mistake, therefore, is not that he is saying something that it is just too proud or a little bit arrogant, but that what he is saying is dead wrong. His goodness is irrelevant to the problem that he is talking about. Therefore, God says that the tax collector who simply looks at his shoe tips and says, “*I’m no good,*” is justified. Now, why?

The point is that this parable, like most of those Jesus taught, is about

death and resurrection. It is not about morality, spirituality, or anything else that we would like it to be about. It is about the fact that both the Pharisee and the Publican (the tax collector), are dead ducks. The Pharisee is a very high class kind of dead duck, but they are both dead as far as being able to reconcile with God is concerned. The point about all of this is that the reconciliation God has in mind for them is totally dependent on their death.

Jesus came to raise the dead. He did not come to teach the teachable; He did not come to improve the improvable; He did not come to reform the reformable. None of those things works. Jesus taught His disciples for three years. They never caught on to very much at all (until the outpouring of the Holy Spirit). God has been teaching the world for millennia. The world hasn't done anything much about it. The tragedies go on. The lies go on. The nonsense goes on. The twaddle goes on. All the things that are wrong with the world go on. They are not amenable to talk. They are amenable only to action and, therefore, Jesus came to raise the dead — meaning by deadness, you in your deadness, the Pharisee in his deadness, and the tax collector in his deadness.

Now you ask yourself a question: “*Do you like that parable?*” Of course, you don't like it. The reason you don't like it is that it violates every sense you and I have about the view that we really are basically doing fairly well. If only other people were as nice and considerate and as wonderful as we are, the world would be a better place to live in, and God says, “*No. That will not work.*” It can't be done that way. It cannot be done by people who think they are winners. It can be done only by people who are willing to admit they are losers and then who are willing to trust God in the death of their losing to do it for them, to deliver them the gift of a reconciliation with God. This is humble truth.

Again, I ask you the question: “*Do you like that?*” Once again the answer has to be, “*No, you don't like that . . .*” Because here is this terrible tax collector who is really a monstrous character and probably rubs salt in everybody's wounds. He drives around in a stretch limo with a case of

Glenfiddish Scotch (\$700 a bottle) in the back of the trunk and several very expensive call girls with him at all times. He has all that just because he has been skimming the cream off his neighbor's milk money. The point is that the Pharisee is no less dead than that dreadful character.

So I want you to turn the parable around a little bit. Just imagine what it is like to see how the Pharisee is so wrong. Imagine God sitting in the temple at a golden card table in a golden chair and in come these two characters. The Pharisee comes across the temple where God is very busy. He is creating the universe out of nothing. He is holding the stars in their courses. He is reconciling all the generals in the Pentagon and the street walkers in Times Square and the drug addicts asleep in doorways. He is making the hair on my head grow silver. He is doing all these things and He is very busy.

Up comes this character, this Pharisee, and he whips out a pack of cards and he does a couple of one-handed cuts and an accordion shuffle and bridges them and fans them out for God and says, *"Pick a card. I want to play cards with you."* God folds the deck back up and He says, *"You can't play with me."* So the Pharisee says, *"No, no. I've been very lucky lately. Let's play Black Jack."* He deals God a king and an ace and God pushes the card away and says, *"Look, I don't want to take your money. You can't play with me. The odds are always on the house here and besides, no matter how full you think your deck is, you haven't got a full deck and you can never win playing this game of cards with me. So why don't you just be like that fellow over there who is looking at his shoes and the two of you go over and have a free drink and enjoy yourselves because you can be home free here if you will only stop this nonsense of trying to sell me, trying to win over me, trying to get an arm up on me, to do something to me to prove that you are okay. I don't care that you are not okay. I will raise you from the death of your lack of okayness. I will raise you up. Just trust me. That fellow over there, all he said was he was no good. He threw himself in trust on me. He's home free because all the dead are home free in my working of the universe, in my reconciliation of the world. All you have to do is recognize that death is the key to your*

salvation.”

Now you ask yourself the question, “*Do you like that version of the parable?*” Again, you still don’t like it. I’ll prove you don’t like it. Suppose the tax collector goes home justified. All right. You want me to bring him back a week later? So, I’ll bring him back. The first trip back, the first week after this original experience, we’ll bring him back with no changes in his life. Same stretch limo, same girls in the back, same expensive scotch and he comes in and he goes through the same routine. He looks at his feet and says, “*God, be merciful to me. I am no good.*”

What will God say to him? In the way Jesus told the parable, God will say the same thing this week He said the week before. He will say, “*This man goes home justified because he admits he is dead.*” He did not tell him the first week, “*You are justified but don’t do it again.*” He said, “*I have raised you from your death. You trust that. All right? Go in peace.*”

The second week with no changes, the same thing. Do you like that version of the story? No. You don’t like that. The rat is getting away with murder. So I will do something else. I’ll give you a second version. Bring him back yet the third week for another trip to the temple, but this week bring him back with some changes in his life. That is what you are itching for me to say; I think that you want me to say something like he really needs to change his ways, mend his ways at least a little. All right.

So we bring him back the third week. He is not driving a stretch limo. He is driving a Hyundai. He has only one girl in the car with him and he is drinking cheaper scotch and giving the difference to the Heart Fund. Why would God listen to that list of two-bit improvements when He wouldn’t listen to the Pharisee’s list of really respectable virtues, a really solid citizen?

The thing you have to ask yourself is, “*Why are you itching to send the Publican, the tax collector, back with the Pharisee’s speech in his pocket?*” The answer is we fear salvation that is so cheap that it saves everyone in his or her death.

Death. Death of sin, death of disaster, death of grief. That is where God works. God works in the losers of the world; which is to say He works in all of us. What that means — and the reason why we fear it so much — what it means in the long run that death is catholic. Death is universal. Death gets us all, and if death is the only ticket anyone needs into the reconciliation in Jesus and if everybody has that ticket, then God has no taste. God is vulgar. God is indiscriminate. God is immoral. He lets in Hitler because He forgives Hitler's sins. (He does, in Jesus.) He lets in my brother-in-law. He lets in me. He lets in you. All we have to do is believe it, not earn it.

In Jesus' proclamation, we have a God who couldn't get a union card in the God union, who couldn't make it because we have set up the rules for God. A God has to be a punisher; a God has to be a judge; a God has to be a respectable God. He has to do all the things that enforce morality, and God doesn't. On the cross, in Jesus, He drops dead to the whole subject of sin and shuts up about the whole subject of condemnation. It is over. As St. Paul says in the beginning of the 8th Chapter of Romans: ***“There is, therefore, now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”***

Therefore, this parable is about death and it is about the resurrection from the dead. The point is that death is all of the resurrection that we can know now. The most important thing is that we believe in Jesus. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and they will live. That is the humble truth about this parable.

The tax collector went home justified because he chose to trust the only thing that can justify — the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Pharisee was not justified, not even a tiny bit, because he could not accept the humble truth of his own death. God invites you to accept that truth and to trust Him in His promise that, in the death and resurrection of Christ, every thing that needs to be done has been done . . . we are reconciled to God in Christ Jesus.

Amen.