

## 10/23/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl whether you are here in person or tuning in some other way.

On this windy, warm fall day that has the firefighters all on edge, we gather to meet the God who Jesus reveals, to find forgiveness and fellowship, and to know that God hears our prayers.

### CALL TO WORSHIP

Our call to worship this morning is taken from selected verses of Psalm 51, which is a psalm of confession, anticipating the prayer of the tax collector in our parable today. The psalm is written with the pronoun “me” which I have changed to “us,” as we read it together.

L: Have mercy on us, O God, according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion blot out our transgressions.

**P: Wash away all our iniquity and cleanse us from our sin.**

L: Our sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

**P: Create in us a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within us.**

L: Restore to us the joy of your salvation  
and grant us a willing spirit, to sustain us.

***All: Open our lips, Lord, and our mouths will declare your praise!***

### INVOCATION PRAYER

God, thank you for the great love you have shown us through the person of Jesus. Let our spirits be receptive to your presence in order to see where you are at work in our lives, in our community, and in the world. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

(I am sad to let you know that Marvin Voth did have surgery on Friday afternoon to place a rod and screws in the broken bone in his leg; he came through the surgery well, but the situation deteriorated fairly quickly and he passed away last evening. We will remember the family in our prayer this morning.)

Creator God, we are grateful to gather together in your presence, to worship and fellowship, to learn more and be challenged yet again by the wisdom of the parables that Jesus taught. With humble and open hearts, Lord, we continue to seek your surprising and upside-down ways of navigating in this world. We confess that often our pride gets in the way as we strive to follow the teachings of Jesus and to show your love, God, to those around us.

We need your Holy Spirit with us, as we go about our daily lives. We need guidance, wisdom, courage and honesty so that we might respond faithfully to whatever circumstances and opportunities we might encounter. We thank you, God, for the faithful opportunities created by the Mentor program here at Alexanderwohl – for the chances that adults and students have to

learn to know one another, to encourage each other and enter into meaningful relationships of faith and friendship. Thank you for Sandy who has given so much of her time and energy to overseeing this program and thank you for each participant – Lord, we pray your blessings on each person and each pair as they begin or continue in these relationships. May there be growth and gratitude for everyone.

We pray also for the mid-week activities – for the students that come to learn and have fun together and for the adults who are investing their time into teaching, guiding and caring for these students. May your love be felt and known to all who participate.

O God, we bring our requests and our longings to you in prayer. Be with those who are seeking healing – in bodies, minds or spirits. Thank you for the healing that Myron has had and we ask for continued strength and healing for him. Be with children who are struggling with health issues – Lord, we know kids are resilient, and yet we also know that there are some really difficult viruses and illness floating around these days. Be with their parents and care-givers also as they nurse them back to health. We pray for our elderly too who can be more vulnerable to illnesses – we ask for their protection.

Gracious God, for those who are grieving, we seek your comfort and peace. For the family and loved ones of Marvin Voth we pray. He has been a part of life here at Alexanderwohl for many, many decades and we praise you for Marvin's life and faith, for his strength of character and the gifts with which you blessed him. Be with his family now as they grieve his loss and celebrate his life. We pray also for the family of Angela Base as they grieve her passing as well. Comfort and sustain them in these days.

Bless our worship now, God as well as the worshipful work that will come later. May we glorify you with the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts. Amen.

Prayer of dedication – Generous God, we are grateful for your love. Give us generous and giving hearts, so that the hurting world may see your love and light reflected in us. Amen.

## WHO'S RIGHTEOUS NOW? – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 18:9-14

This fall we have been coming back to the parables of Jesus – Jesus' very concrete stories, comparisons, and illustrations that he used to communicate the mystery of the reign of God, and to help us learn to live in God's reign.

For this morning, I've selected a simple parable that Jesus told to challenge self-righteous people. In reality, we almost don't need a sermon or meditation on this parable. It is about as self-explanatory as they come.

Still, there are more possibilities for interpreting this parable as we try to understand a realistic scenario for what Jesus' listeners might have imagined when he talked about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.<sup>1</sup>

This parable is found only in Luke's Gospel. The parable falls within one of the longest teaching sections of Jesus. Jesus observes that some of those listening were "convinced for themselves that they were righteous and looked on everyone else with contempt." It was an attitude that saw everyone else as if they were nothing.

So, Jesus describes a Pharisee and a Tax Collector going up to the temple to pray...

[SLIDE: PARABLE OUTLINE]

Now, from our own cultural perspective, we tend to assume that these are private, silent prayers, and that the tax collector and Pharisee are by themselves.

It's more likely that Jesus' parable has in mind one of two daily sacrifices in which many worshippers gathered at the temple. After the sacrifice of a lamb was offered to cover the sins of the people, there was a time of burning incense, and the faithful would offer their prayers. It's probably at this point that the two men are praying.

The Pharisee stands to the side, signifying that he is better than the other people gathered there. The Pharisee begins: "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people: swindlers, unrighteous, adulterous... or like that tax collector over there."

Then the Pharisee boasts of fasting more than the law prescribes and giving all his tithes. The center of the parable is the Pharisee's self-righteousness.

The Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders very careful to follow the Torah, with an extensive tradition about how to do so. They maintained clear boundary between themselves and fellow Israelites less concerned with Torah as they understood it.

In spite of how negatively the Gospel portrays them, they were important religious leaders, and the rabbinic Judaism that develop in subsequent centuries has its roots in Pharisaical Judaism. Jesus was probably more similar to the Pharisees than other Jewish groups, but was not afraid to challenge them.

Imagine if the Pharisee gives his prayer out loud, within earshot of the others gathered, and also within earshot of the tax collector. The tax collector could have assumed that he doesn't belong in this space, and left in silent humiliation. But he offers his own prayer as well.

A friend of mine from seminary previously served in Bolivia with his wife. They worked at a shelter or transitional house for women living in the streets, including sex workers.

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<sup>1</sup> See William Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, chapter 10, and Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, chapter 9

These women had known any different kind of life. It was next to impossible to integrate into mainstream society. In that sense the work could be discouraging. It felt too late for them.

My friend recalled that these women knew they would never be welcome in a church, and they acutely felt the hypocrisy of church-people. Yet surprisingly, they knew their Bibles, and gravitated toward the person of Jesus.

[SLIDE: PHARISEES AND TAX COLLECTORS]

Who were the tax collectors? Did he deserve his bad reputation?

In Jesus' day, the Romans offered large contracts with local entrepreneurs to collect various kinds of tolls, customs, or tariffs. Chief tax collectors like Zacchaeus bought these contracts on the bet that they could collect enough to turn a profit. It was a risky venture, rife for abuse, and incredibly unpopular. They were profiting by colluding with the foreign occupiers.

The chief tax collectors depended on rank-and-file collectors to do the collecting, and the collector of the parable is probably not rich. He is in a socially vulnerable position. He is a social deviant, catalogued as a sinner.

In many places in Mexico and Central America, gangs or extra-judicial armed groups collect war taxes as a stream of income. In the neighborhood where I lived in Honduras, these taxes were collected from bus routes and corner stores. They were ostensibly for "protection," meaning "if you pay, we'll leave you alone." You can imagine that's popular.

In a more mundane way, you can think of the last time you were inconvenienced by an airline, or waited for hours trying to get through to someone from an insurance company who was barely helpful. The person that you actually deal with may not be able to do much and also aren't paid a whole lot, yet they endure the public anger.

This tax collector is the face of an unjust system. He participated in it, and may have been simultaneously oppressed by it. The tax collector was a social deviant, but he didn't leave the temple area. He offered a prayer of his own.

It was simple. "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

He beat his chest – a gesture that was common of women at funerals, but almost never used by men. People beat their chests when Jesus was crucified. It showed extreme sorrow and anguish. An Arabic commentator said that collector beats his chest because the heart is the source of his evil thoughts.

Many of you are familiar with the ancient words: "Kyrie, eleison; Christe, eleison." Lord, have mercy; Christ have mercy. This is what the blind beggar says to Jesus later in the same chapter of Luke.

But the tax collector uses a different word that refers to the sacrifice of atonement. Probably the sacrifice that just took place in the temple. In effect he's praying, God, let the sacrifice for the sins of the people cover my sins too! Let my prayer be able to reach your ears too!

Imagine someone not considered worthy of participating in communion. They watch as others go up to receive the bread and the cup, and pray, “God, receive me at your table.”

[SLIDE: PSALM 51]

Psalm 51:16-17 says, “<sup>16</sup>You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

<sup>17</sup>My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise.”

This is what the tax collector offered.

The irony of the parable is that the Pharisee is a tax collector too, of a different sort. The temple brought in a lot of revenue from tithes that all of the “righteous” people paid. These tithes allowed the temple elites to live well. The Pharisees were part of and parcel of this system, and it was a system that Jesus directly challenged.

But the Pharisee is completely blind to the ways he participates in injustice.

[SLIDE: LUKE 18:9, 14]

Here’s the thing. Jesus concludes that the tax collector returns home justified, rather than the Pharisee. “Justified” here means “considered a righteous person.”

So, the parable is book-ended by words having to do with being “righteous.” We’ve come full circle, because Jesus began addressing the parable to people that saw themselves as righteous.

The twist of the parable is that the unlikely person is the one who is righteous in God’s sight.

#### APPLICATION

Few of us are overtly self-righteous to the degree of the Pharisee of the parable, though we may sub-consciously have those thoughts. Before you think that the tax collector gets off easy, consider what it would really mean to recognize your own wrongdoing or complicity in a heartfelt way.

When was the last time you gave a heartfelt apology that you really meant? Without any self-justification? I can’t think of many times I’ve done that.

It is hard to respond like the tax collector. I know we get it in our heads, and we’d like to think that we aren’t like the Pharisee, but any of us, including myself that have been respected church-goer all our lives are more likely to behave in our inner thoughts like the Pharisee than we are to be like the toll collector.

To recognize our own sin, or our participation in collective evils, to allow our defenses to be broken... we just don’t want to do it.

Parables are stories to make a point. The characters aren’t actual people. We can be like both characters at different times.

In a conversation earlier this week, Kris Schmucker said it like this: “The parables are told in such a way that one can see oneself in both characters - if one is honest. I don't think we stress this enough. We always cast ourselves in the role of the tax collector or the blind man - when in reality we might be acting more like the Pharisee. Jesus was also trying to teach the Pharisee - pointing out that their actions were not what God intended when He gave the Law.”

The Pharisees were people too, many sincerely believing they were doing the will of God. Maybe the American church as a whole isn't so different. We think we have the truth, that we are the righteous, that we are doing God's will, and yet we potentially miss the heart of the gospel message, focusing instead on believing we are righteous and that we deserve privilege.

We turn a blind eye to those who suffer or are excluded, such as the 2 million locked-up or incarcerated people in the US, a higher rate than any other country.

#### CONCLUSION

It is not easy to practice the humility exemplified by the tax collector of the parable. Surely not all tax collectors would have done that.

One way to assess whether or not an apology, confession, or admission of wrong is heartfelt is that you will do something about it. You will aim to repair the harm if that's possible or make changes in your life. If everything stays the same, then we can assume they were just words and it was not heartfelt.

Certainly, the humility Jesus calls us to is not the same thing as being mired in shame or despising ourselves. Despising ourselves is another way to get stuck and is the flip side of self-righteousness. It comes from an internalized need to think we are better, and when we fail, we turn our anger in on ourselves.

It is a matter of discernment when we most need a word of consolation and when we need a challenging word. Maybe both are possible at the same time.

Jesus calls us to embrace a love of God that is independent of deserving or achieving, and instead based on the shared dignity of being human. It is always living in the freedom of this love that is the root of the alternative way of the Kingdom of God.

(Reflection questions in the bulletin:)

1. How are you like the tax collector? How are you (we) like the Pharisee?
2. What does it really mean to be “justified” or considered “righteous”?
3. If Jesus told this parable today, who might he have picked to be the characters?
4. How is humility and honesty about our shortcomings different than despising ourselves or carrying deep shame?

Before the sermon, we sang a song of confession together, based on Psalm 51. Now as we try to grasp the gospel, we will sing together another song that describes God's grace.