

Pray Together, Stay Together

10/23/2022

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Preaching on:

Luke 18:9–14

Every good story has a hero and a villain, right? Dorothy vs. The Wicked Witch of the West. Luke Skywalker vs. Darth Vader. Cinderella vs. her stepmother and step sisters. The best stories have good guys and bad guys. So, in Jesus' story this morning, who's the good guy and who's the bad guy? What do you think?

Two people go to pray in the temple. One of them stands there in the place of honor and says, Oh man, aren't I a great guy? I do everything right. I tithe, I fast. Woo, I'm glad I'm not like those people who don't. It was a Pharisee. And another is a tax collector, and he stands off to the side—apart from everyone else—beating his breast; he doesn't look up. He looks down and he says, Have mercy on

me, a sinner. And the text tells us that one goes down to his house, justified—the tax collector—and the other one, the Pharisee, does not.

Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Was the Pharisee (*boo, hiss*) a good guy? Our Bibles tell us the Pharisees were always after Jesus and Jesus was always arguing with them. We know that the Pharisees are no good. And our Bibles tell us that Jesus hung out with tax collectors, he visited their homes and sat down to eat with them, and that two, maybe more, of Jesus' disciples were tax collectors. So, it's obvious right. We know that the Pharisee is the bad guy and the tax collector is the good guy, right?

Unfortunately, things are almost never that simple when Jesus gives a parable. Today, we think that the Pharisees are no good and the tax collectors are faithful, but that was not what anyone who would have heard Jesus actually telling this parable would have thought. To them the Pharisees were the good guys and the tax collectors were the absolute lowest of the low. Now not everyone would have agreed with everything the Pharisees did and said, but they were known to be faithful, righteous, pious. Today they'd be the people who go to church, the people who stand up for good morals and speak out against corruption, they'd be on the board of the local soup kitchen, they'd be the president of the rotary club, or the longest serving member of the school board or the PTA, maybe the head of the local Democratic or Republican club—upstanding citizens in every way. And tax collectors were universally despised both as traitors to their people for collecting taxes for an occupying empire (the Romans) and as singularly corrupt individuals who abused their collection powers to take more than was required from poor people in order to line their own pockets. Imagine today a spy who reveals information that endangers our troops or agents or telemarketer conman who prays on the elderly, or a thief at a non-profit who invents children on paper in order to steal COVID relief funds to buy themselves a new car.

So, for Jesus, this was not a story about a bad man who thinks highly of himself (the Pharisee) and a good man who is humble (the tax collector). And think about it. We don't need that story, do we? Nobody really needs to learn that lesson. Instead it's the story of how a notoriously bad man (the tax collector) is justified or saved, while the unquestionably good man is not.

And, so, this becomes a parable for us and for our times because it is a parable about what we think about our own righteousness, of our own points of view, and what we think about our neighbors. Because there are a lot of people in the world today who know they are on God's side, they know that they are right, and they despise the people who believe, act, and behave differently than them. It's all over the place in our culture right now, isn't it. Now listen to the parable. The parable is not about the dangers of thinking you're good and being wrong. It's not about the dangers of thinking you're right and being wrong. It's not about the dangers of judging others and being wrong. It's about the dangers of being actually good and actually right.

And, Beloved, it pains me to preach it! Because, believe me, I know I'm a good person! You don't

become the Sr. Minister of Glen Ridge Congregational Church by being a lousy person. I've worked hard my whole life to understand and to follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to put it into action in my life, and dedicate myself to it. And I can't read or hear the news without hearing about something or somebody that I really don't approve of—crime, politics, crime masquerading as politics, social disagreements about policing, about race, about guns, about abortion, even religion—isn't it a minister's job to know that I'm right about this stuff? And you know what? The Pharisee was right too! And he knew it! Everyone knew it! Heck, even the tax collector knew it! But being right didn't do the Pharisee any good. And it won't do any of us any good either. Beloved, I'm no tax collector. I'm no traitor, I'm no thief. I'm honest, I'm faithful, I'm generous. And I've worked so hard to get there. I'm the Pharisee. I'm the good guy and I know it. And that's the problem.

I know, I know. This is starting sound like another one of Pastor Jeff's crazy Jesus sermons. The reason that my sermons about Jesus are a little hard to swallow is because the Gospel is hard. The Gospel is not hard because it asks us to be good. The Gospel is hard because of *how* it asks us to be good.

Now, what does all this mean? Am I not allowed to have an opinion about what's right and what's wrong? You're allowed to have an opinion about right and wrong, of course. So, you're saying we're just not allowed to be certain—absolutely certain, convicted—that we're right. No. You're allowed to be sure, to be certain that you're right. It does open us all up to a certain level of risk because none of us is always right, but you're allowed to know that you're right on an issue. You're allowed to be good. You're allowed to be right.

Here's the rub, good people. A good person also needs to be the kind of good person who doesn't stand alone, like the Pharisee in our reading, who doesn't pray alone, who doesn't fall into the trap of thinking that believing, even that living out, the right thing makes us better than other people.

A good person must follow Jesus. And what I mean by that is that a good person is someone who, like Jesus, is willing to sit down and eat and drink with the sinners and the tax collectors of the world. Christians are not called to be better than the world. We are called to love the world, to serve the world, to be in relationship with all of God's people and all of our neighbors. No good person should ever be "alone" in the Temple, holding themselves up above others. And no person (good or bad, and let God be the judge of that!) should ever be forced to pray at the margins of the Temple or to live at the margins of our human kindness. Being good should not make me think that I am better than anyone else. Being good should connect me to everyone else—especially to the lost, the suffering, and the oppressed. Love your neighbors as you love yourselves.

Which brings me to my concluding point this morning. As I was reading the scripture this week and preparing for this sermon, I couldn't help but notice the separation that these two individuals experienced, siloed from one another, the Pharisee praying alone, the tax collector off at the margins

by himself. And I couldn't help but think what would've happened if they had just connected to one another, found one another, and maybe even prayed together. Couldn't that have been the beginning of transformation for the good guy and the bad guy? Couldn't that have made everything a little bit better?

Here at Glen Ridge Congregational Church we are really focusing in on how to connect to one another inside the walls of the church and how to connect to our wider community. And in the spirit of that, I want to invite you all to a little program. I'm starting called the Prayer Partners Program. The basic outline is very simple. I want you all to be brave enough to pray with one another. It's simple. You're going to get a prayer partner for the month. Every week of that month, you're going call your prayer partner or you're going meet them in person. You're going to chat for 15 minutes about what's going on in your life—the good, the bad, the ugly—and then you're going to bow your heads and you're just going to pray for one another. And then at the end of the month, if you want to do it again, you'll get a different prayer partner. And so, we are going to connect to one another in a way that is transformational and that prepares us to connect to people in a way that is transformational beyond the walls of our church.

I hope that you'll join me in praying together and in letting your goodness connect you to all of God's people.