

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**October 24, 2010**  
**Luke 18:9-14**

**“Not Like the Others”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

For about ten years, I have gathered every Tuesday morning with a group of eight clergywomen and men for weekly Bible Study. We are all good colleagues and good friends and so when we first sit down together each week we catch up on news and check in around the circle. This past Tuesday when we gathered—coffee cups in hand—we said our initial hellos and how are you’s, and then someone burst out with this news....hey everybody did you hear that the Chrystal Cathedral in Orange County, California, has filed for bankruptcy?

What? someone exclaimed somewhat incredulous.

That’s a megachurch, I cannot believe THEY are broke!

What? someone else said, that’s the birthplace of the televangelist show “Hour of Power?”

What? someone else said, that church is famous for preaching a “gospel of abundance!” THEY filed for bankruptcy?

Wow! someone else said.

Then our group of eight good clergy, your pastor included, proceeded to laugh about how NONE of us led megachurches and weren’t we glad....none of us preached a gospel of abundance and then went broke....none of us had to face angry creditors and explain that scarcity not abundance was often the sad reality even in a megachurch. Ha ha ha, we joked and we cracked each other up. Oh thank goodness, we said, we’re not like them.

Okay. Big laughter behind us, we settled down and got to work. Someone pulled out their Bible and read aloud the Lectionary passage for today from Luke.

*Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by*

*himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'*

After the passage for the week was read, we launched, as we do every Tuesday, into an analysis of what this might mean and the context of the story. We sat there sharing our very erudite interpretations of the passage when someone said in a small voice, "We're just like the Pharisee in the parable. We sat here and made fun of the Crystal Cathedral and pointed our fingers and said essentially, God, we thank you that we are not like THEM. The whole point of Jesus' parable is that the Pharisee is smug and self-righteous. Guess what? We're smug and self-righteous!"

Whoops.

The circle of good clergy folk got rather quiet.

We are just like the Pharisee, someone said. Shame on us.

Rarely have I had the experience where a story from the Bible so perfectly fit current human behavior in such a remarkably short window of time.

Usually you can read a Biblical story or a parable by Jesus and think of a time, maybe years ago, where this lesson was demonstrated in your own life.

But our clergy group managed to re-enact the story of the smug, self-righteous Pharisee just moments before reading the parable in Luke. That's a new record.

Ah-h-h-h yes. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he told these parables.

And ah-h-h-h yes. Some of us need to hear them again and again.

So what all is going on in this story and what more can we learn from this short but poignant parable?

Let's set the context...I want you to picture the scene at the temple...

The Priests are up before dawn. They come early to the temple and stoke the great fire at the altar. The musicians arrive and tune their stringed instruments. The ram's horn player arrives, warms the instrument in his hands and then blows air through it. One of the priest's assistants pulls a lamb from the pen behind the temple, binds its legs and brings it to the altar.

As dawn breaks, the ceremony begins. The musicians play the tunes for the Psalms and all present sing together. The priests process in. Once at the altar, one priest takes a knife to the ram's throat, drains its blood into a basin and throws the blood on the fire at the altar. The sacrifice of atonement has been made. The other priests light incense and the plumes of smoke indicate that now is the time for the prayers of the people—the people (all men) are now invited to say their individual prayers out loud. The prayers are meant to rise on those scented plumes of smoke and go from the speaker's lips to God's ears.

The elaborate ritual, with the music and the singing, the fire and the animal sacrifice, and the smoke rising all leads to the moment when individuals say their prayers aloud. This is the setting for Jesus' parable. And it is at the moment, with the fire and the plumes of smoke rising, that the Pharisee marches to the front of the temple and lifts his voice to God.

The Pharisee seems to have a clear conscience and he is certainly a proud person. As he walks to the front of the temple, he does not want to even brush up against those who are not as holy, those who do not abide by the law—for that would make him unclean. The Pharisee must have assumed the prayer position of the day—hands raised, palms up and open. He must have lifted his eyes to God and prayed loud enough to make his prayer a little lecture for all within earshot.

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income.”

Those are all good things...the Pharisee is the model of pious behavior. The problem is he is smug and self-righteous.

Unlike the lowly tax collector.

The tax collector has also come to the temple to pray. He too has witnessed the sacrifice of atonement. But the tax collector does not parade up to the front of the temple where he can be seen by all present. No. He stands in a corner at the back of the congregation, removed from the others, and he beats his chest in a display of emotion usually reserved for women at funerals. The tax collector does not look up to heaven but says quietly, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

The tax collector is the model of humility. The problem is he lives a despicable life.

The power of this parable, for me, is that both men are a mess.

The Pharisee does everything right—he fasts twice a week, he tithes which means he gives away a tenth of his income, he goes to the temple to pray. This guy is doing everything right. Except that he is self-congratulatory, superior and smug.

The tax collector on the other hand does everything wrong—he is complicit with the Roman Empire, he makes his living by badgering poor people and demanding taxes for Cesar, and he makes his own income through extortion, skimming a few extra shekels for himself. This guy is doing everything wrong. Except that he is humble and repentant.

Both the Pharisee AND the tax collector are doing something very right and something very wrong.

And most of us are like them.

We do many things right, like the Pharisee—we are generous, we support our church, we come to church, we pray. But we can also be superior, self-congratulatory, and self-righteous. Okay maybe you aren't, but I am. I joined right in with the clergy on Tuesday pointing the finger at the Crystal Cathedral and noting how I was not like them. I'm good at being smug.

And yet like you I believe, I am like the tax collector. I am capable of recognizing that I am sinful, I can be humble and repentant and ask God to forgive me for I mis-step, I do badly, I sin. Like you, I believe, I can be humble and ask for forgiveness.

The irony of this parable is that both the Pharisee and the tax collector are a combination of part sinner and part saint and aren't we just like them?

The Pharisees' behavior is saintly. But his superior attitude is sinful.  
The tax collectors' behavior is sinful, but his humble attitude is saintly.

If they were combined into one person, with the Pharisees behavior and the tax collector's attitude, then we would have the perfect person.  
But no one is that perfect person.

We are, each one of us, a big contradictory combination of sinner and saint.  
We do good work but we boast, we act in faithful Christian ways but draw attention to ourselves.

We act in disreputable ways but we ask for forgiveness.

We do embarrassing and unbecoming things but and we humble ourselves before God.

Like the Pharisee and the tax collector we are one big paradox.

Our actions can be pure then our words contradict them,

Our words can be pure then our actions contradict them.

Like the Pharisee and the tax collector, we are part sinner, part saint.

And so we can gather with colleagues and friends and chuckle with a superior and smug attitude about the misfortunes of another group of people of faith.

It is a shameful story, but true.

And yet we can also recognize how misguided our behavior has been and ask for God's forgiveness.

What helps me is to remember, as I have told you before, that God is not done with me yet. God is not done with you yet.

As I have said before from this pulpit, we are all works in progress.

We struggle, and it is an ongoing struggle, to make our good behaviors congruent with our good attitudes.

We want to live faithfully, as good Christians, AND be humble about it.

We long to be in right relationship with God, so that our beliefs, our behaviors, our actions and our words are congruent with our deepest values and the principles of our faith.

We try. And that is the important part. We try and we fail and we try again.

We are works in progress and ours is a forgiving God.

What I know for certain is that God will forgive us over and over again as we try to align our good words with our good actions and we make ourselves true channels of God's love and grace. As long as we are trying, God is able to forgive and welcome us home again and again.

And so we stumble and we try again.

Reaching, seeking, learning.

We are, each of us, part sinner, part saint.

Our work is not to achieve perfection. Our work is simply to keep trying so that OVER TIME we diminish the sinner and increase the saint.

We want to be like the Pharisee in behavior and the tax collector in attitude....faithful and humble.

So let us strive for honesty in our relationship with ourselves and in our relationship with God.

Let us strive for openness, an open heart, an open mind, and a life open to God and to change and transformation.

Remember! Our God, who is merciful, loving and just, is working ON us, and working WITH us.

Each one of us is a beautiful, unfinished, still growing and changing work in progress.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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