

“Be Humble and Exalted!”

James Merritt “heard about a fifth grader that came home from school so excited. She had been voted ‘prettiest girl in the class.’ The next day she was even more excited when she came home, for the class had voted her ‘the most likely to succeed.’ The next day she came home and told her mother she had won a third contest, being voted ‘the most popular.’ But the next day she came home extremely upset. The mother said, ‘What happened, did you lose this time?’ She said, ‘Oh no, I won the vote again.’ The mother said, ‘What were you voted this time?’ She said, ‘most stuck up.’”

Talking about our Reading, **Merritt concluded, “Well this Pharisee would have won that contest hands down.”** Merritt continued, “He had an ‘I’ problem. Five times you will read the little pronoun ‘I’ in these two verses. He was stoned on the drug of self. He suffered from two problems: inflation and deflation. He had an inflated view of who he was, and a deflated view of who God was.” (James Merritt, Collected Sermons, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.)

Luke began our Scripture by informing us of his and/or the Christian community’s understanding of Jesus’ motivation for telling the parable included in the Reading. Luke wrote in verse 9, *“Jesus also told this parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else.”* Now, Luke did not specifically tell us those people were mostly the Pharisees and their legalist allies but in his telling the parable, Jesus identified the person, who was sure of his “own goodness” and who despised the other person in the story, was a Pharisee. We also know, from many other accounts in the New Testament gospels that Jesus was frequently in confrontations with the Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, and the Priests. Their attacks against him often dealt with how he associated with persons whom they despised.

Starting to tell his parable, Jesus explained the two characters in the story were a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. Everyone, who was present for last week’s Worship Celebration, may recall the Youth and some of our Young Adults did a great job of Worship leadership on the text relating to the Tax Collector, Zacchaeus. Well, the Reading for today was actually switched with the Scripture for last Sunday, so in our Worship Celebrations, we already had the report about the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, the hated Tax Collector, and then, today a primary character in Jesus’ parable story was also a Tax Collector. **If we had taken these two Readings in their literal order, then our Scripture about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector would have been followed by a real life Tax Collector – Zacchaeus, who was renounced by the Pharisees.** We don’t know, if that was the original order of how those events occurred or, if Luke chose to put them in that order to emphasize and, explain in advance, the reason Jesus welcomed the “sinner” Zacchaeus into the New Faith Relationship with our Divine Parent. **Indeed, the parable in today’s Reading reveals the extremely radical and subversive teaching and theology of Jesus, which this congregation has intentionally chosen to follow by being aligned with the United Church of Christ’s God Is Still Speaking Program of Radical and Extravagant Hospitality.**

Now, let’s look closely at Jesus’ parable. Jesus taught in verses 11-12, *“The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, ‘I thank You, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank You that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give You one tenth of all my income.’”* Now, as the Pharisee described himself in this parable, he was a very upstanding pillar of the religious community! Almost any pastor would love to have him, his talents, example, and, of course, his money in the life of the congregation. Indeed, most church folks have much more in common with that Pharisee, than with the Tax Collector – “sinner” in the story. Hmm, Jesus had a pattern of making his followers and adversaries painfully uncomfortable!

Larry R. Kalajainen noted, “The famous actor Gregory Peck was once standing in line with a friend, waiting for a table in a crowded Los Angeles restaurant. They had been waiting for some time, the diners seemed to be taking their time eating and new tables weren’t opening up very fast. They weren’t even that close to the front of the line. Peck’s friend became impatient, and he said to Gregory Peck, ‘Why don’t you tell the maître d’ who you are?’ Gregory Peck responded with great wisdom. ‘No,’ he said, ‘if you have to tell them who you are, then you aren’t.’”

Kalajainen mused, “That’s a lesson that the Pharisee in our gospel reading apparently had never learned. His prayer, if it can be called that, is largely an advertisement for himself. He’s selling himself to God. ... He would have done better had he had Gregory Peck there to whisper in his ear that if he had to remind God who he was, then he wasn’t.” (“The Good, the Bad, and the Justified” by Larry R. Kalajainen on sermons.com)

Raymond Bailey “draws an uncomfortable (for us church folks) comparison between Pharisees and ‘good elders, stewards, or deacons. They are the ones who do the work of the church and provide the financial support necessary to support religious institutions. Pharisees were devoted to God and righteousness, and most of their faults were the result of overstriving for holiness. Their zeal was often misguided, but at least they had zeal in their desire to please God.” After reporting Bailey’s comment, Kathryn Matthews concluded, “When religion, the institution and our place in it, become the end instead of the means (as they so often can), church leaders can easily lose our way, as the Pharisee praying in the Temple evidently did.”

“The same pitfalls on the journey of faith endanger us in the church today, so this little story Jesus tells hits home for us as well.” (“Just Worship/No Distance Too Great” by Kathryn Matthews on Weekly Seeds)

Now, let’s look closely at Jesus’ description of the “sinner” in **verse 13**, **“But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, ‘God, have pity on me, a sinner!’”** There seemed to be no pride or vanity in the heart or head of that sinner! He did nothing to earn God’s approval – he gave no money and made no animal sacrifices. He merely recognized he did not deserve God’s Love and Acceptance but he prayed hoping for it and trusting in it.

Moving from discussing the Pharisee to the “sinner” in the parable, Kalajainen pointed out, “The tax collector, on the other hand, didn’t have to tell God who he was. He knew who he was and he knew that God knew who he was. His prayer is not an exercise in self-promotion, but a confession and a plea for mercy. He is not selling himself, but opening himself. And Jesus says, ‘It is this man who went home justified.’” Kalajainen explained, “To be justified means to be declared ‘not guilty.’ It means to be declared right.” Kalajainen concluded, **“The tax collector is declared to be in the right relationship to God while the Pharisee, who is so certain of his own righteousness, is shown to be in the wrong relationship with God.”** (“The Good, the Bad, and the Justified” by Larry R. Kalajainen on sermons.com)

Yes, Jesus concluded his parable and boldly stated his point to his followers and adversaries. We are told in **verse 14a**, **“I tell you,” said Jesus, “the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home.”** Not only were Jesus’ adversaries upset when Jesus said such things but, also, were the original 12 disciples. We know that because they often challenged Jesus and, in private, would demand an understandable explanation.

As I mentioned in the message last Sunday, our Divine Parent sent the Only Son – Jesus Christ to reveal to us the Truth that God has Forgiven us and both Invites and Welcomes – Radically and Extravagantly All People into the New Faith Relationship with our Maker! This was done out of God’s Agape – Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for everyone. Our Creator’s Radical and Extravagant Forgiveness and Welcome is purely a matter of the Divine’s Grace – Unmerited Forgiveness and Reconciliation with both God and one another!

Kathryn Matthews summarized this process saying, “So Jesus teaches a lesson about God’s mercy in justifying the abject sinner, the tax-collector, instead of the apparently holy Pharisee.” **“If we come before God in humble openness and fervent trust in God’s goodness (how else would we be forgiven but for God’s goodness?), we make room for God to work in our lives.”** Matthews concluded, “That is much closer to righteousness than all the good works we can manage.” (“Just Worship/No Distance Too Great” by Kathryn Matthews on Weekly Seeds)

Jesus elaborated about the Transformation, which results when we sinners come to realize through Jesus Christ that our Divine Parent Graciously Healed, Forgave, Welcomed, and Gave us New Life in **verse 14b**, **“For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great.”** We are only able to recognize the Truth Jesus revealed through his coming into the world, his ministry, death, and resurrection, if our false pride and belief in our ability to save ourselves is destroyed through the humble understanding of our total dependence and need to trust our Divine Parent.

Being so moved by God’s Agape Love and Grace, how do we manifest the New Faith Relationship with God and one another in our daily lives? We get some needed guidance through Brett Blair’s report that “Dr. Karl Menninger, the famous American psychiatrist, once gave a lecture on mental health and was answering questions from the audience. One man asked, ‘What would you advise a person to do if that person felt a nervous breakdown coming on?’ Everyone there expected him to answer, ‘Consult a psychiatrist.’” **“To their astonishment he replied: Leave your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone who is in need, and do something to help that person.”** (Brett Blair, eSermons.com)

In other words, as Zacchaeus, the Tax Collector, promised after he was forgiven, invited, and welcomed into the New Faith Relationship with God and one another, so we are to also follow God’s and Jesus’ examples of Agape – Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love toward one another and all people in our daily lives. Therefore, instead of acting like the Pharisee in the parable, who tried to puff himself up through his legalistic following of his religious laws, we are to be freed in humility to respond and grow in our New Faith Relationship with God by making our dependence on and trust in God’s Agape Love more meaningful to us. **We do that through the greater commitment of our lives, including our finances to our Divine Parent and our Savior by way of Round Grove United Church UCC and our many ministries beyond ourselves. God exalts us when we humbly make ourselves available to live out God’s Agape Love. Amen.**