

“Forgiveness is Another Alternative”

Luke 18: 9 – 14

Makemie Presbyterian Church

October 14, 2007

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector

He (that is Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves they were righteous & 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.”

The gospel of Christ.

To those of us who have been around the barn a few times it is clear that some of the stories that Jesus told, need to be repaired. Or as we say in the south, “they need fixing.”

Not long ago it seems, at our beginning of the summer picnic at Sturgis Park, we had one of these stories, Luke seems to have gathered the most offensive of them. And it was the story of the prodigal son. I decided to preach it as it was. And I did. But I gave it just as it was. There was a man who had two sons, the older son stayed at home & worked & did his father’s bidding, the younger son went away into a far country, lived among the gentiles apparently, fed the hogs, came into terrible times, & decided to return home. As he approached the house the father met him, embraced him, kissed him, and the son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight I’m not worth calling your son, make me a slave.”

But they brought the robe with the rings, they hired the fiddlers, they killed the calf, they had a party upon his return. And I thought it appropriate when I said to you all that God frustrates the proud. and gives grace and forgiveness to the humble sinner.

After that service John and I went out to lunch with some friends, an attorney and his wife. And after lunch the attorney said,

“I know that story. But I don’t know what to say. Well whether to tell you I didn’t like your sermon or I didn’t like the text. It would be easier for me to say that I didn’t like your sermon because my wife doesn’t like for me to speak against the Bible.”

I said, “Well you didn’t hear the sermon. What’s your problem?”

He said, “It’s that receiving that boy back home and having a party for him.”

And I said, “Well, what would you have transpire?”

He said, “He should have been arrested. He broke the law. He ruined the family. Lived with gentiles. Out with the pigs. Totally against the law. He should have been arrested!

And I said, “And given a mandatory sentence?”

He said, “At least six years.”

He was serious. I tried to make light of his comments. But he would have none of it. So I decided that story needs to be fixed.

And now Luke a few chapters later does it again. Two men in the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and I hope that word is not to flavored in your mind, it’s a man committed to the law; oral & written law, one should obey the word of God, night and day, twenty-four hours a day, waking and sleeping. He gave a tenth of all he had for the poor in the meeting, prayed and fasted regularly, and kept himself clean, not like adulterers, thieves, and rogues. Even like this tax collector. He was squeaky-clean, give him credit. He could of run for office with no fear of somebody pulling something out of his past and getting him disqualified immediately. He was okay. He was proud to be okay.

The other the tax collector was a reprehensible character. He had decided to collect taxes for the Roman government from his own people. He was a political traitor. He was in terms of citizenship, a non-entity. He couldn't serve on a jury; he could not do anything a normal citizen did, because he was out. He couldn't even look around, he couldn't look up, he couldn't look down, he couldn't look within. He just beat his breast and said, "Please God."

And he went home justified. Now I knew with an audience like this, this wouldn't go over. So I fixed it. When you get older, you want people to like you.

The way to make this acceptable is to consider the Pharisee is really the rogue. Narrow-minded & brittle, judgmental, bigoted, harsh, cruel in his treatment of others, condescending in his attitude, pinched nose, ummph. Right. Republican.

I meet these all the time. This is Joe the Bartender. Nice guy. An outsider. We love outsiders. Someone who can say, "God I thank you that I'm not like these Pharisees, and all these other people who do their religious duty, I'm free of all that."

Stands behind the bar. Takes counsel with the people. Helps those who are in distress. Whose family has left them. And is generally the healer, counselor, and pastor, of the real people. Now it's all right for him to go home justified because we've given a reason within himself to be justified, he's a nice guy. The other one, a reason not to be justified, he is a religious bigot.

This is a little exercise you have to go through to make these stories acceptable. To find a reason in the person for being accepted. Because there is in many of us, I can't speak for you, but there is in many of us, a fundamental idea that people should just get what they deserve; and stories like the father with two sons, the two who went up to the temple to pray and other such stores are offensive because they deal with that rare & strange experience known as forgiveness. In which, in which, most people do not believe.

Why is forgiveness so hard. On October 2, 2006 Charlie Roberts showed up at the door of an Amish school house in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, and shot ten little girls, killing five, then himself with a shot to his forehead from his 9mm handgun. Amid the chaos and heartbreak, the Amish reached out to Roberts' widow, Marie, the three children he left behind and his parents, showing Roberts family, kindness, compassion, & forgiveness. Last week the Amish community gathered on the anniversary of the shooting. And the reporter said on the TV news, "maybe the time has come for the Amish to no longer have their own schools. They are too forgiving." You see, you just don't forgive somebody for goodness sakes!

I been thinking a good deal lately about George Wallace. It's an Alabama thing, I reckon. John says, he never thinks about George Wallace. I remember that square-jawed man that stood across the path to equal opportunity.

"Segregation yesterday, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

It's was not just a southern disease. In the presidential primary he took the city of Boston. He brought out a certain quality in people, they found a voice in George Wallace. George Wallace changed. I believe he really changed. The people who had supported him felt betrayed. Those who had opposed him still felt suspicious. But I watched the line of mourners as they went past his casket, all ethnic groups, all races, all kinds of people went by to pay their respects...I think he changed. Given what he did for education, given what he did for politics in Alabama, I think he really changed. Before he died he said, "I still don't understand why the American people have not forgiven me." Well George it's hard.

It's hard to believe that it really really takes place.

Why? Part of it is just getting a lot of bad advice. People are in a situation that calls for forgiveness. get a lot of advice from friends, neighbors and relatives. "Don't you ever forgive him. But what you're to do is to pretend that you do but keep bringing it up every once and a while and you will have power over that creep as long as you're married, you'll have it."

Or they say,

“Hey, look, who are you. You’re not perfect, nobody’s perfect. Who are you to judge? Cut him a little slack for goodness sakes. After all we’re all human. He,he,he.”

Bad advice everywhere. Probably it’s the fear of what others will think. What others will say. One thing people will say, for sure is that you’re soft on sin. Pretty soft on sin. The way you prove you’re not soft on sin? Never forgive anybody anything. Show your moral courage, show your moral stature. Never in my lifetime. Then everybody will know, you stand for what’s right.

Even though I personally can not think of anything more immoral than not forgiving.

One day Jesus was teaching, and right in the middle of his lesson, the disciples raised their hands and said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.” That’s the Greek, it’s hard to get it over into the English. And they said, “Increase our faith, O teacher, increase our faith. What you are asking is more than we can do.”

What was he teaching? Go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, giving your coat. No, no, nope. It was this, even if someone sins

against you and turns and asks for forgiveness seven times a day, you are to do it. And they said, "increase our faith. We can't, we can't do it." It's extremely difficult.

Why is it difficult. I think that part of it is that many people feel you have only one or two alternatives. To just cut everybody some slack and say, "Well, you know it's not all that bad, is it?" See just to be non-serious.

On the other hand you have people who choose the alternative which they feel to be rigid, immovable, stand for this, crucify, never let them off the hook. And the fact of the matter is forgiveness is another alternative. Forgiveness looks like, looks like, you didn't take it seriously, but feels extremely the pain of it. In order for there to be forgiveness, there has to be the pain of the one who stands for what is morally right and there has to be the release of the one who says, "let him go."

As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, "forgiveness negates and yet fulfills all righteousness." And the only person who can really forgive is the one who has been hurt by what has happened. The rest of us don't, sitting around proving how liberal we are, how conservative we

are, doesn't amount to a hill of beans, because its not our case. Drink gallons of coffee, sit up all night, go up to McDonald's; "Well, what do you think? Well, the way I look at it." You know why we're so free with those opinions? Because we don't hurt.

But the one who feels violated, something in me just wants to die, is the only one who can say "I forgive you."

This is why God is qualified to say it, "I forgive you." This is why you have been or will be qualified to say it, "I forgive you."

I am willing, I am willing, to turn loose of my pain. This pain that has really become my identification. This pain which I have vowed to carry with me, because this is who I am now, the hurt one, the victim. I'm going to turn it loose.

I saw a couple recently, I've known them for years. But about eight or nine years ago he violated the marriage vow. I was there, I was there when he said, clear as crystal, "keep thee only unto her as long as you both shall live?" And I heard him, he said, "Yes." He didn't. He didn't. It was so terrible destructive to him, to her, to the children, to the parents, to the friends, whew!

I saw them recently. They were walking along talking having a good time with another couple. Just as happy as dead pigs in the sunshine, or so it looked. So it looked. But were they really? Were they really? Do you believe, I'm asking you a question now.

Do you believe that she could really forgive him?