

“A Turn From Contempt”

Luke 18:9-14

Salem United Methodist Church

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While I was still in my undergraduate nursing program at Eastern Mennonite University I spent a ten-week period as a nursing assistant at Christ House. Christ House is a ministry in Columbia Heights, in the District, that serves homeless men who are too sick to be on the streets but not sick enough to stay in the hospital. One of my daily tasks while being at Christ House was tending the wounds and washing the feet of the men who had this regimen prescribed by the nurse practitioner or physician. I would prepare the instruments and gauze on the table fill the basin with warm water and soap and call whomever I needed into the room. One by one the men filed in and out of the treatment room as me and the other nursing assistant for that day took turns completing our assigned wound changes and feet washing for the day. If you have ever been a nurse or nurse's aide this rhythm might sound familiar.

Not only did this one-on-one time with the residents afford me the opportunity to get to know each individual it also gave me the chance to understand exactly why they were at Christ House in the first place. I will admit, upon first glance, one wonders, why can't you be a "normal" person within society. And then in unpacking what normal even means I came to realize my error in saying this at all. I came to unpack normal each time I dressed a wound or washed one of the resident's feet.

When a resident would be sitting in front of me for a wound change I would wonder, "Why can't you get a job?" Many of the men would have professional skills or important construction knowledge. But then the man in front of me began telling me about how he was a refugee from Latin America, escaping from gang violence in his home country, fleeing to America with a few surviving friends and relatives only to learn that his new culture and home is less than friendly and helpful in giving him a chance to thrive. No matter how hard he tries he can't get a green card, much less a visa; rendering his skills useless because he can't secure a job legally in the country.

Another resident would come in and I would wonder, "Why are you so scruffy? Why don't you shave your beard and cut your hair?" Then he told me how he has been chronically homeless for two decades. It began with a simple job loss. As most of us know, losing our income and our paycheck makes life nearly impossible to survive, especially when we don't have a safety net, like our church community or family members to take us in. This black man had nobody to catch him as he fell, leaving him without a place to live and nowhere to go, sleeping on the street.

Then another man came in for treatment and I wondered, "How could you let your wounds get this bad?" And as we changed tunneling wounds on his backside he told us how he didn't even realize they were developing because he didn't have access to a reliable shower or regular clean clothes. He was numb from sleeping and sitting on concrete so the wounds were seeping from infection before he realized they were there. At that point, a walk-in clinic with a multiple hour waiting period meeting once a week could not possibly handle the care he needed.

The gospel lesson this morning is so jam-packed full with relevant issues in our 21st century world. It's a simple parable we hear frequently. But, in reading the story, we may ask ourselves, who is the Pharisee and who is the tax collector? Am I the Pharisee, or am I the tax collector? How desperately I want to say that I am the tax collector, but, in this scenario and across parts of my life, I know I act like the Pharisee.

While reflecting on my experience after that summer I realized that Jesus is constantly calling all of us to a new world order, just as he was two thousand years ago in the midst of his ministry. You see, for a second century Jew, Pharisees were champions and heroes of their religion, living in complete devotion to the laws of

the Torah, praising God and always keeping themselves ritually clean in devotion to the God of Israel. The tax collector on the other hand was a grungy, scheming, a thief who took extra money to pad his own pocket.

In our world order, who do we look to and praise in our current society? In the story I first shared, would it be the young white girl, giving of her time to be a nursing assistant with the urban poor? Or, do we lift up the homeless men...the one's our society labels as homeless, lazy, dangerous, unintelligent, drug-doing, drug-dealing, or beggars? Yes, I admit, it's not a complete parallel, but it honestly portrays the significance of Jesus lifting up the tax collector as a humble man worthy of forgiveness in his own cultural context. Jesus was portraying for them a complete turning around of their current world order, their understanding of society and what it meant to be faithful to God. Jesus was bringing forth a new world order, a new way of being in relationship with God apart from how the Pharisees, the champions of Judaism, were practicing religion.

And again, I return to this question in the midst of the parable, just in a different way: who is lifted up in our very own society, and why? Who do WE look on with contempt, just as this Pharisee looked upon the tax collector with contempt. In the midst of his prayers, he says, thank goodness I am not like sinners, like thieves or like this man, the tax collector. Our communities, our workplaces, our very own hearts are full of contempt for the "other," for the one not like ourselves. Our current political climate is a perfect example of this hateful back-and-forth, saying that if you're like THIS ONE, you don't love God, or if you are like THIS ONE, you cannot claim to be a follower of Christ. We see others in our daily lives, and think to ourselves; **"Thank goodness, I am not like them."**

This expression of looking down on others or valuing some lives over other lives is hard to let go of. It is almost human nature to look on others with contempt. It is bred into us from the time we are born. It is even bred into how we spend our money and where we get our STUFF. However, It is the way of THIS world and Jesus calls us to back away from living in the world. The contempt, the disgust of this Pharisee upon the tax collector is not the turning around of the world that Jesus proclaims throughout Luke's Gospel. From the very inception of Jesus' ministry in Luke he claims that he has, "come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance," (5:32). This is the central thrust of Jesus' ministry! Jesus befriends tax collectors and sinners in the parables prior to -- and following this exact parable, (7:34). And, at the very beginning of Luke, Mary, Jesus' mother, proclaims in her song that, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; (1:52, part of Magnificat).

And from the very first verse of this parable we hear this pattern of reversal when the narrator says that Jesus, "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Jesus points out not only the self-sufficiency of the Pharisee, his lack of dependence upon God for his righteousness; BUT ALSO how the Pharisee looks upon "the other," with contempt. Jesus is revealing to the crowd that we cannot look upon our neighbor with contempt if we hope to partake in God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The Pharisee, in his religiosity, was separated from the tax collector, and as a result, was separated from grace, mercy, and forgiveness, essentially separated from all the gifts of God upon humanity.

I find that the Scriptures, in their conviction, remind me of the very things in my life that separate me from participating fully in Christian discipleship. I will admit, this is one of the hardest lessons of the whole Gospel for me. It is intrinsically part of my instinct in encountering others different than myself. To be skeptical, to look upon them with judgment, and to wonder why they aren't like me, why they aren't participating more fully in this world...giving life "everything they have." And that, is the very problem with contempt. There is no grace or mercy in that mindset. While yes, we can hold one another accountable in the world, accountable to our Christian lives, we must first also be able to account for that person's humanity. We must know who they are, we must love them, and we must do our best to extend grace, mercy, and forgiveness to them first, and then we can walk along beside them through their life, holding them accountable and allowing them to hold us accountable to the very Christian life Jesus describes again and again throughout his life's

ministry in the Gospel accounts. Let us live both with LOVE and accountability, grace and accountability, mercy and accountability, forgiveness and accountability. And let God sustain us and pour out his own love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness upon us all in our journeys together. Amen.