

“Two Prayers, One Temple”
Luke 18:9-14
17th Sunday after Pentecost

September 19, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

As some of you know, our church is going to be celebrating its 75th anniversary next year. There’s a committee in place right now, appointed by the Session, and that committee is doing excellent work, starting to make plans for this celebration in our life together.

I am, needless to say, very excited about the celebration that we’ll have next year, very humbled to be with you as we anticipate this joyful and momentous event.

I’m also reminded of a story that the Rev. Lillian Daniel tells about a church she once served. They were going to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of their building.

It was a church in New England that had had its share of hard times and conflicts...but the 75th anniversary was an occasion to REJOICE, and they wanted to get it right!

So this church took two years to prepare for this wonderful event.

- A special worship service was planned, a party was put together, all sorts of committees were at work behind the scenes—it all went on for the better part of two years!

The anticipation was building, everyone was ready.

Then, Daniel writes, “...about a month before the big day, it came to our volunteer church historian’s attention that there had been a mistake.

In calculating the date.
[Not the day. Not the month.]

We had the wrong year.

Our building's 75th anniversary **had been the year before.**"

Lillian Daniel began getting calls from colleagues, saying, "Really? Really? Your whole church missed its own anniversary?"

As Daniel puts it, in historic New England, missing your own church's anniversary was "[considered] pastoral misconduct."¹

(Ok, help me out here: 1947 is the date on our timeline in the Atrium, add 75 years to that, you get 2022, right? Whew...)

It's a humbling experience, to make a visible mistake.
But we all do it, right?
We all make mistakes.
Errors in judgment.

I'll never forget the time when I had just started at another church, years ago, and an older woman who was just wonderful, she was walking into church one morning.

And I said, "Hello, Jess, how are you?"
And she replied, "Ben—I'm Jean, not Jess."

And I was mortified.
Not simply because I had called her by the wrong name.
But because Jess was the name of her recently deceased husband.
I had never met him, but I had heard stories about him, he was a pillar of the church.

¹ Lillian Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious Is Not Enough": Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*, New York: Jericho Books, 2013.

And I saw her, and called her by his name...

Mistakes aren't just a common experience.
They are a humbling experience.

Of course, switching a name around, or getting a date wrong—those are innocent mistakes. But there are times when the mistake does not appear to be so innocent.

Just take our parable for today.
A story of two prayers in the same temple.

The Pharisee says:
“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

But the tax collector prays:
“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

And which one made the mistake?
The Pharisee.
It's always the Pharisee.
The Pharisee who thought too highly of himself.
The Pharisee who exalted himself instead of humbling himself.

In our Gospel narratives, it's always the Pharisee who's making the mistake.

So, if I said to you that I'm looking out at this congregation here today, and I see a bunch of Pharisees...would you take that as a complement?

Probably not.
I imagine you would hear it as an insult, as me judging you.

You might think I'm accusing you of hypocrisy, or just plain ol' arrogance, a lack of humility that exists with our Pharisee for today.

But before we go any farther with this parable, we need to remember something: contrary to the popular Christian imagination TODAY, the Pharisees of Jesus' day were **not** bad people.

They were good people.

Pharisees were committed to following Jewish Law, the Torah.
Pharisees were committed to tithing, giving away 10%.
Pharisees were respected teachers.

In Jesus' day, Pharisees were not seen by the populace as hypocrites. They were respected leaders, people who "walked the walk as well as talked the talk."

For evidence of this, just look no further than the Apostle Paul. Do you remember what Paul was in his previous life, before he was blinded by Jesus on the road to Damascus?

He was a Pharisee, and even AFTER he became a follower of Jesus, he never considered being a Pharisee to be a character flaw. He saw it as a mark of distinction.

In the book of Acts, when Paul is standing before the Council, he says, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees."

Not just I was, but I am!!

If I were to describe a modern-day Pharisee, I might say it's someone who gives 10% of their money to the church, who has exemplary worship attendance, who is respected in our faith community, who has served on the Session 3 times, generous, dependable...always ready to say "yes" to her church.

Now don't get me wrong—I'm not saying that you ARE the Pharisee in this morning's parable.

I'm just saying that I see a lot of faithful, generous, dependable, committed people out here in the pews this morning. I'm saying that Pharisees were faithful, generous, dependable people...

So what are we going to do with the Pharisee?

This Pharisee, who thanks God that he is not like the tax collector over there...

We could sit in judgment of him.

We could kick him, scold him for his self-righteous ways.

It's fun, don't you think, to beat up on the Pharisee.

But before we do that, perhaps we ought to remember that we all get caught up in the sin of the Pharisee, even though we are not the Pharisee, we all are prone to comparing our ways to someone else's ways.

As the pastor Matt Fitzgerald put it recently, "Silicon Valley exploits this. They keep thousands employed [through Facebook or Instagram or whatever] in what [the writer] Jia Tolentino describes as the 'exhausting performance of our righteous online selves.'"²

And you don't have to call someone out on social media to do it. It can happen anywhere, at any time.

² From Matt Fitzgerald's sermon, "New Creation—A Sermon for Reopening," preached at St. Paul's UCC, Chicago, IL, June 14, 2021.

In fact, I'm going to say a few phrases right now, and I want you to think about how you feel when I say those phrases:

Black Lives Matter

The recent Texas abortion law

Vaccine mandates

Now...let me invite you NOT ONLY to think about how you felt when I said those phrases. Let me invite you to consider how you feel toward people who stand on the opposite side of any of those issues from you.

Do you have THAT feeling in mind?

That's the problem that our parable poses.

Because we all have issues that we feel strongly about.

How do we approach these issues, with are sure and certain arguments in one hand, and humility in the other?

It's especially hard, because we don't see everything we need to see.

The Rev. Mark Fenstermacher is a Methodist pastor who tells the story of the time, much earlier in his career, when he was a young pastor, mid-twenties, sent to a church that had had a fight. Church fights are the worst, they breed all sorts of self-righteousness. And half of that church's members had left by the time Mark arrived.

So he visited people in their homes. Both the people who had stayed in the church, and the people who had left the church.

But he admits that he didn't know what he was doing or how to handle the pain that he discovered in this recently conflicted

congregation. And he was baffled about what to do when the anonymous letters started arriving in the mail, when the silent phone calls began.

“They were never directly threatening,” he writes, “but they were unsettling. Someone who knew me very well and was a part of the congregation was writing the letters. On the phone calls, someone would stay on the line, saying nothing.”

Finally, one day, he figured out who it was.
And he decided to pay the woman a visit.

“I called Betty and asked if I could come [over]...It was a warm, summer day when I knocked on the back door of the farmhouse. We sat at her kitchen table. We made small talk for a few minutes, and then I told Betty that I knew she had been making the anonymous phone calls and writing the letters.

Mark goes on:

There are times when you suddenly see something you have missed. As the words came out of my mouth, I suddenly saw another piece of the puzzle that made it impossible for Betty to have been the caller and the letter writer. But the words had been spoken, and they sat there on the kitchen table between us.

I braced myself for a storm to break over my head. I waited for Betty to promise that she and her family would never again darken the doors of a church with such a foolish young pastor.

Betty looked at me across the table, and I saw disappointment in her eyes. There was no storm.

“No, pastor,” she said quietly, “I didn’t make those phone calls or write those letters.”

Then Betty said, “Pastor, would you like some sweet tea?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mark said.

Betty poured a glass of sweet tea.

Betty sat there with Mark, and they drank tea.

“We talked about the family, the farm, weather, and the church.

When the tea was gone, she let me pray.

She walked me to the door, shook my hand,

and said she would see me on Sunday.

He concludes:

“Now when I think of grace I always think of sweet tea...Sweet tea reminds me of the afternoon when grace came to me unexpectedly and despite my foolishness, a saint held onto me.”³

That’s what Jesus wants, right?

He wants us, despite our mistakes and our foolishness, to hold on to one another.

So what do you think we should do with the Pharisee/

Scold him? Shame him?

You know what we could do?

We could try to hold onto him.

I could try and talk to him.

I could try to talk with him, or find someone who could talk with the Pharisee not about how WRONG he is, but about how GOOD God is. Someone who could help expand the Pharisee’s imagination about the goodness of God, the grace of God, to try to get the Pharisee to see

³ From Mark Fenstermacher’s article, “Mistake,” in *The Christian Century*, July 6, 2016.

that his relationship with God is dependent on his relationship with that tax collector.

Jesus says that the Pharisee was “standing by himself.”

And the tax collector was “standing far off.”

There’s DISTANCE between these two people.

And I suspect that Jesus told this parable...*because he wants that distance to disappear.*

I was going to see if Mark Fenstermacher was available, but he’s probably too busy with the pandemic and taking care of his church right now.

Who would be a good person to talk with the Pharisee?

You know who came to mind?

The Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

In 1849, a young Fyodor Dostoyevsky was imprisoned in St. Petersburg with a group of other revolutionaries and sentenced to die. This was before that great Russian writer had become a great Russian writer.

Dostoyevsky and the other prisoners were marched out into a square in their burial shrouds. The firing squad gathered, and the drums sounded.

Death was seconds away.

Then, at that instant, a messenger arrived on horseback.

It was part of a prearranged plan.

The execution was to be stayed by the clemency of the czar.

The prisoners responded to this event in different ways, but Dostoyevsky was brought back to his cell and suddenly was overcome with joy.

“I cannot recall when I was ever as happy as on that day,” he later recalled. “I walked up and down my cell...and sang the whole time, sang at the top of my voice, so happy at being given back my life!”

“When I look back on my past,” he wrote to his brother, “and think how much time I wasted on nothing, how much time has been lost in futilities, errors, laziness, incapacity to live; how little I appreciated it...

“Now my life will change, I shall be born again in new form...
Life is a gift.”⁴

I think Dostoyevsky would be a splendid person to talk to the Pharisee. To show the Pharisee that life is NOT an achievement to be earned, but a gift to be received.

Dostoyevsky would be great at talking humility with the Pharisee, about what it’s like to make a mistake with your life, to get a second chance at life...there’s just one problem.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is dead.
He died 140 years ago.
I’m going to have to find someone else to talk with the Pharisee.

Hmmmm...what about you?
Do you think you could do it?

⁴ As told by David Brooks, in his book *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, New York: Random House, 2019.

Do you think you could talk to the Pharisee about the breadth and depth of God's love, how God's love is bigger than any of us have ever imagined?

That's the problem with the Pharisee.
It's not that his ego is too big.
It's that his imagination about God is too small.

Do you think you could tell the Pharisee that the greatest mistake all of us make is to imagine a God who is far too small? I need someone who could show the Pharisee that God's ways are much more graceful than our ways, and God's judgments so much more loving than our judgments?

About how in God's kingdom, the love and grace of God is there for the tax collectors of the world, and for the thieves and rogues and adulterers of the world, and for the older brothers of the world and for the younger brothers of the world, and for the sheep who always seem to get lost in the world, and for the 99 sheep who always stay at home in the world, and for the early morning workers and the mid-day workers and the johnny-come-late workers, and for the priests and the Levites and the Samaritans of the world, and how God's love is even there for the Pharisees when they get caught up thinking that their value in God's eyes is an achievement, and not a gift...

Do you think you could not only talk to the Pharisee, but learn to love him?

I know, I know—I can tell what you're thinking.
You're thinking you don't know any Pharisees.

And you're right.

The Pharisee that we're talking about today was a person who existed in the imagination of Jesus.

But you know someone.
There's someone out there who needs to experience this kind of
love.

Out there, right now,
there's someone out there who's standing far off,
self-righteous and scared,
and that person needs someone to bridge the distance,
to share the marvelous,
unimaginable love of God with them.

Perhaps that person could be you.

Amen.