

The Good News is... It's Complicated [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 18:9—14

People are complicated. Church people are complicated. And therefore the experience of a church community, like this one, is always more complicated than it seems. Then again, maybe we shouldn't over-analyze the situation. Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe a shiny cross-pendant hanging around someone's neck is just jewelry. Maybe if we've sung one hymn from the hymnal we've sung them all. Maybe if we've heard one sermon from the pulpit, we've heard them all. Maybe it's as simple as "*Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so*"—in which case, thank you for coming, and enjoy rest of the day! On the other hand, if you and I actually take the time to dig deeply into the Bible, and if I truly listen to persons who aren't like me, I begin to experience some contradictions, some paradoxes, some nuances. ***"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."*** Which one are you?

Automatically, of course, we assume that the Pharisee is the *villain* because he seems so self-righteous. And yet, all he's confessing is the fasting that Jesus himself does in Luke 4:2 and the tithing of resources that Jesus will encourage and accept in Luke 19:8. Pharisees do not necessarily wear the dark hats. Some of them, like Nicodemus and the Apostle Paul undergo great transformations while never renouncing their status as Pharisees. Meanwhile, if anyone's inclined to leap on the bandwagon of the tax collector, we might want to think twice. Tax collectors are Jews who collect revenue for the Roman Empire, which enslaves the poor and keeps the peasants down. Tax collectors are also notorious for skimming a little off the top..

So, I'll say it again. As much as we like to simplify things and divide relationships into the good guys versus the bad guys, people are complicated. People are tainted. Everyone has been mixed up in mixed company with mixed motives. And the only question is—ARE WE WILLING OR ABLE TO FACE UP TO IT? In John Steinbeck's famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, representatives from the bank come out to the farms to foreclose on the tenant farmers. It's the throes of the Great Depression; the economy has tanked. And the confrontation between them goes like this:

“... but it's our land... We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours...”

“We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a person.”

“Yes, but the bank is only made of people.”

“No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men and women. It happens that every person in the bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more... I tell you. It's the monster. Men and women made it, but they can't control it.”

And so it goes. The systems we create get out of our control. Grand schemes take on a life of their own. I remember watching the 'Marc Zuckerberg' character in the film, *Social Network*. He's a lonely nerd at Harvard University and he wants a young girl to go out with him. When she blows him off, he develops an Internet platform in which the privileged men at the elite school might rate and rank the coeds. Zuckerberg trashes the woman who had rejected him, and the rest is history. (*Facebook* is now *Meta* and has made over \$165 billion in the past year.) But, you see, the parable of the film portrays the founder of this company with pimples—sitting by himself, pushing a button on a laptop, asking the girl he once gossiped about to accept his FRIEND REQUEST. Things are complicated. People are complicated.

And Jesus, we believe, of all people in human history, does not shy away from these complications. Hebrews 5:7—8 claims:

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered...”

But now, of course, comes the most dangerous question; and if we'd like to keep things simple, we don't have to ask it: *why didn't God save him from death?* I mean, if God is God, why not extricate him from the whole convoluted affair? Why allow Jesus to be tainted by association with everyone whose ever lived and died under the tyranny of Empire? And yet, here's the good news: because no one's getting out of this alive, Jesus isn't either; he's going to be with us in the most intensely intimate and involved ways. He's going to be with us despite our best efforts to separate ourselves. Think of this. You and I know a lot of people who've left the institutional church, or who've gone from church to church—and why? Many say it's because they disagree with something and they don't want to be tainted by association. And, an increasing number of folks their tax forms and they check 'None' in the box that's invites them to identify their 'Religious Preference.' And why? Well, because they don't want to be complicit in two-thousand years of church corruption—everything from the Crusades, to the Spanish Inquisition, to Henry the Eighth to World War One to tel-evangelist sex scandals. At the same time, maybe they still sing what the Doobie Bros sing: “Jesus is just alright with me.” Or, even better, maybe they sing what Norman Greenbaum sings. in Spirit in the Sky:

”I never sinned ,Never been a sinner
I got a friend in Jesus
So you know that when I die
He's gonna set me up
with the spirit in the sky...”

You see, that keeps it simple. A person can still believe in Jesus and in heaven, but not be associated with all those... you know... those hypocritical Presbyterians. And who can blame them? ***“God, I thank you that I’m not like other people...”*** That’s what the Pharisee says in the first century parable of Jesus; but today it’s *not* the expert in the Jewish religion who says it. It’s the person who doesn’t want to be tainted with religion at all. And again, I know this may sound strange, but I get it.

People are complicated and very often their complications are hard to swallow. For example, in the mid-1800’s, in this country, churches published so-called *Slave Bibles*, in which, if you were to look up Galatians 3:28, where the Apostle Paul writes, ***“there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free...”*** there would be no such verse. They also cut out how the people of Israel escaped from their enslavement in Egypt. But here’s what really turned my stomach: in an Episcopalian congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, they tried to simplify things in a Christian Slave Catechism:

Q: Who gave you a master and a mistress?

A: God gave them to me.

Q: Who says you must obey them?

A: God says I must.

Q: What book tells you these things.

A: The Bible...

Q: What makes you lazy?

A: My own wicked heart.

Now, I'm reviewing this history, not to congratulate anyone on how much more progressive we are, but to invite us to consider how tainted we are—even today. You see, it's part of the bad news and the good news that we continue to get mixed up with these biases and their prejudices. And so, is it any wonder that so many people don't want to be associated with this stuff? At the same time, isn't it also a wonder that, after learning about this stuff, some are like the tax collector who prays, ***"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."*** Or maybe they resonate with what the prophet Isaiah says, when Yahweh floods the temple with holy radiance. He says, ***"Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips. AND I LIVE AMONG A PEOPLE OF UNCLEAR LIPS."***

Several years ago I took an interest in the history of the *Nez Perce* tribal community and its interactions with the nineteenth century missionaries, Henry and Edna Spaulding. For me, it was just a passing curiosity. A few Elders from Lapwai approached me at a meeting, and the next thing I knew Adrian Moody was feeding me morsels of smoked salmon and inviting me to experience a sweat lodge. I declined the sweat lodge because I didn't want to be associated with any pagan rituals and I didn't want to get naked with strangers. But then, during one of my trips to the reservation, we went to the *Henry Spaulding Museum*, and after observing the displays inside, we ventured outside. Adrian wanted to show me something, and as he strode out beyond the dumpster, I began to get a little nervous. *Where he's going?* Well, after a few more steps, this Native American Elder from one of the Presbyterian Churches found this massive tree, about five feet in diameter; and embedded in the knot of that old growth were these rusted shackles. Adrian then placed his hands within the broken circles of these shackles, and he looked me in my white face. He said, "This is how they converted us."

Now, I can only *guess* what you're thinking; and so forgive me:

- Some of you might be trying to get me and yourselves off the hook, and you're saying, *'Scott, we weren't there. That wasn't our fault. We're not responsible.'*
- Others, however, might be doing a little historical research in their heads, and reminding themselves how these native peoples weren't so innocent themselves—that many of the tribes enslaved other tribes and killed one another. It's the way of the world.

And yes, believe me, I've been to both of these places, which amounts to the prayers of the Pharisee: "I THANK YOU, GOD, THAT I'M NOT LIKE OTHER PEOPLE."

But what if—at the end of the day, and on, into the night—the only faithful recourse is for us to admit that we're involved. We're immersed in the whole kit and caboodle—the entire enchilada—the long, torturous trail of human evolution. And AT OUR BEST—the GOOD NEWS IS—we can be AT OUR WORST. Like the tax collector: "GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME, A SINNER."