

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 27, 2019

“Outrageous Grace.”

Luke 18:9-14

Let me ask you a question this morning: how many of you have been accused of being a poor listener? Or should I call it “selective listener”? We hear what we want to hear. Most of us have been guilty of this at one time or another. Maybe we’re easily distracted. Maybe we’re thinking of something or someone else. There are all kinds of reasons communications break down. Maybe we have trouble listening to others because we’re tired or stressed out. And maybe we just don’t care enough about others to pay close attention to them.

We’ve all been guilty of being a bad listener at one time or another.

This may have been why Jesus spoke in parables so often. He knew that we are easily distracted. He knew that we have our own agendas. And he knew that sometimes our ego gets in the way of hearing God’s voice.

Maxie Dunam, Professor Emeritus of Asbury Theological Seminary, likes to tell the story of the University of Tennessee football coach who bought a bolt of cloth thinking he would have a suit made out of it. He took the material to his tailor in Knoxville where the University of Tennessee is located. The tailor measured him, examined the bolt of cloth, did some computations on a piece of paper, and said, “I’m sorry coach, there just isn’t enough material in this bolt to make a suit for you.” The coach was disappointed, but he threw the bolt of cloth in the trunk of his car, wondering what he was going to do with it.

A couple of weeks later, this same coach was in Tuscaloosa, Alabama—the home of the Crimson Tide—arch enemies of the Tennessee Vols. He was on his way to the coast for a vacation. Driving down the main street in Tuscaloosa, he noticed a tailor shop, which reminded him that he had that bolt of cloth in the trunk. He stopped, thinking he would give it a try. He told the tailor he had bought this bolt of cloth and wondered if he could do anything with it.

The tailor measured him, measured the bolt of cloth, did some computations. Finally, he said, “Coach, I can make you a suit out of this bolt. What’s more, I can even make you an extra pair of pants. And if you really want it, I can give you a vest out of this, too.” The coach was dumbfounded. “I don’t understand,” he said. “My tailor in Knoxville told me he couldn’t even make one suit out of this bolt of cloth.”

The tailor said, “Coach, here in Tuscaloosa, you are not nearly as big a man as you are in Knoxville.”

We all like to think we’re a big man or big woman in some arena, don’t we?

It’s no fun when our ego trip gets derailed. Imagine how Jesus’ listeners felt in our Bible passage today. This parable would have been shocking to them, mind blowing. Let’s hope their big egos don’t get in the way of them hearing and understanding it. And let’s hope that our big egos don’t prevent us from hearing and understanding it today.

This Bible passage starts with the words, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable...” Every parable Jesus told was an opportunity. An opportunity to understand God better. An opportunity to conform our lives to the image of God. An opportunity to turn away from sin and get a fresh start. So, what did Jesus want to teach his hearers with this story?

First of all, Jesus wanted them to know that, when we compare ourselves to others, we turn religion into a competition. Jesus wanted his hearers to understand that they were wasting their lives and missing out on the truth of God by looking down on others because of their religion. God is not about religion, but about relationships. And it’s a mistake to define ourselves by what we are not, instead of what God is. We were made in the image of God. If we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are adopted into God’s family and are children of God.

So, our identity is not based on comparing ourselves to others. Our identity is not even based on our right actions. Our identity is based on who God is.

And the Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy.

Self-righteousness is not the same thing as holiness. The Pharisee made the mistake of comparing himself to other people. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people...” We can all do that. And in comparison, we don’t look too bad.

The Pharisee did look good compared to the tax collector. Pharisees were members of a strict religious sect. They devoted their lives to observing the rules and statutes of Jewish religious law. They were the gold standard for righteousness in their society.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was a traitor to his own people because he worked for the Roman government in a capacity that allowed him to cheat and oppress his fellow Jews by adding on extra taxes to line his own pockets.

The profession encouraged corruption. Tax collectors were considered traitors and extortioners. They were not allowed to be witnesses or judges in court because they were considered untrustworthy. They were excommunicated from the synagogue.

The Pharisee thought he was all right in comparison to the tax collector.

But the tax collector wasn't who he was in competition with. His competition was the man he himself was created to be. The Pharisee's prayer showed there was a gaping hole in his life—he didn't really know God. That's a sad and scary truth.

We can do everything right in life, keep all the rules of our religion, and still not know God.

The second thing Jesus is trying to teach his hearers is when we compare ourselves to God rather than with others, we realize we don't have anything to offer him. What does the tax collector in this parable do? He doesn't even look up to heaven when he prays. Instead, he looks down at the ground and beats his breast in sorrow, and he simply prays, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

This tax collector compared himself to a holy, holy, holy God and he knew he had nothing to offer. I think the tax collector identified himself with King David who wrote these words in Psalm 51: "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." (Psalm 51:17)

The tax collector asked for God's mercy. And God gave it to him.

Jesus finishes the parable with the words, "I tell you this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." What does that mean, "he went home justified"? It means his sins were forgiven. He got exactly what he asked for—mercy from a holy, holy, holy God who knows that we can never be holy enough to deserve his mercy. So, God sent his perfect, sinless Son, Jesus, to take away the penalty of our sin and make us holy in his eyes.

And that brings us to the last point of this parable: If you don't know grace, you don't know God—because grace, the unearned gift of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ, was God's plan for us from the very beginning.

The Pharisee, while he is right about the kind of life he should live, he is confused about the source of that life. The tax collector knows the one thing that the Pharisee does not: his life is God's, his past, present, and future are entirely dependent on God's grace and mercy.

The Pharisee missed out on the gift of God's outrageous grace because he thought he could do something to earn it. He didn't want charity. He wanted to be good enough. He was comparing himself to those around him. But the tax collector compared himself to God, and he cried out for mercy. If you don't know the gift of outrageous grace, you don't know God. Because our salvation is not about our goodness, but about God's grace.