

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

Luke 18:9-14: He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 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!’ 14 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.”

Workcamps are a wonderful experience for anyone who goes on one. I have taken many youths on workcamps. Some workcamps were better than others, but there is always something positive to be found while working with new friends and while serving those in need. I’ve had young people who really did not want to go on a workcamp but, because they did, their lives were changed because they made new friends. And, even more life changing was their interaction with people living in a very different kind of social status or culture. The life stories of those they served opened their awareness, understanding and sensitivity to the needs of others.

Everyone has a life story, a story filled with experiences both good and bad, that has shaped us into the people we are today. And, the stories of our lives continue to be written and to shape us with each passing day. There are those parts of our personal stories that we share with others; and there are those parts of our stories that we hide, perhaps, because they are too painful to share, or maybe because we are embarrassed by something that happened. Maybe we don’t share because we are afraid no one will understand the effects an experience has had on our lives.

We all have a life story that shapes/influences our likes and dislikes, the things that make us uncomfortable, our fears and anxieties, our skills or limited abilities, our judgement and perceptions. There’s a beauty in our varied stories when with humility we honor one another’s stories.

A grocery store cashier wrote to advice columnist Ann Landers to complain that she had seen people buy birthday cakes and bags of shrimp with their food stamps. People on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were “lazy and wasteful,” the writer said.

A few weeks later, Landers’ column was devoted entirely to responses to that letter.

One woman wrote, “I didn’t buy a cake, but I did buy a big bag of shrimp with food stamps. So what? My husband had been working at a plant for fifteen years when it shut down. The shrimp casserole I made was for our wedding anniversary dinner and lasted three days. Perhaps, the grocery clerk who criticized that woman would have a different view of life after walking a mile in my shoes.”

Another woman wrote, “I’m the woman who bought the \$17 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the checkout woman in the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn’t know is the cake was for my girl’s birthday. It will be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone within six to eight months.”

You never know what other people are dealing with, do you? It’s very easy to pass judgment on someone’s actions or words when something seems to contradict what usually is

considered to be right or normal responses or behaviors. This is not only true when we consider our reactions to people who are needy, unchurched people and people who are of a different ethnicity, but we even do this to one another in the church.

We find the perfect example of this conduct in today's scripture reading. An obvious observation we make about this story is that there's an arrogant praying Pharisee passing judgement on a praying tax collector pouring out his guts to God. We're left cheering for the tax collector because he seems to be genuinely repentant, while the Pharisee does nothing but praise himself and judges himself to be much holier in God's eyes than the tax collector. It seems that the Pharisee is blind to the tax collector's broken spirit.

Now tax collectors were not popular because they collected taxes for a government that overburdened the people. They were thought to be thieves, too, because in order for them to make a living, they had to charge more for the taxes and pocket the extra, and how much extra they could charge was not regulated, which was too much of a temptation for many tax collectors.

So, if we consider this piece of information, we might understand the Pharisee's judgement. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we do the same things sometimes. We lump people into stereotypes and judge them unfairly. But we don't know the rest of the tax collector's story that brought him to this point of repentance in his life. And, because his prayer seems legit, we feel sorry for him.

Let us not forget, however, that the Pharisee has a life story, too. This particular Pharisee or especially the whole Pharisaic movement in first-century Judaism was steeped in a tradition of Pharisaic piety. The term "Pharisee" itself means "separated." Through their extreme observance of the law, and their strict adherence to all Torah details, the Pharisees sought to separate themselves from their increasingly Gentile/pagan surroundings.

They believed that only by carefully separating themselves from those who did not follow or honor the Torah could the covenant community be preserved. So, a sense of spiritual differentness and distinctness which was morally superior to all its pagan surroundings was applauded and honored. This then is a piece of the Pharisee's personal story that prompted his judgement on the tax collector. Does this understanding of the Pharisee excuse his attitude? Jesus tells us, absolutely not.

This parable reveals to us God's desire for us to humble ourselves, to create a safe and welcoming space, to hear and respect one another's stories, not so we can judge and change one another, but so that we can understand one another, offer compassion and support for one another, learn from one another, communicate better with one another, and do God's work more efficiently with love and unity. Our stories may expose what makes us different from one another, but when we honor them, they become a beautiful tapestry of God's handiwork.

I am finding that there is a beautiful tapestry of stories here at Hagerstown. Are you aware of it? Or, are you having difficulty seeing it at this point in time of your history together? Oh, and my friends, there is so much more beauty and length to be added to this wonderful Hagerstown tapestry. I wonder how we will add to its beauty. How will we make space to learn one another's stories? How will we show honor to our shared stories? How will we use our stories to strengthen who we are together? What will be our combined story as we move into the future? Are you ready and willing to work at this? I am. Let's do it! Amen.