

## **STEWARDS OF GOD'S MYSTERIES**

**Luke 18:9-14**

**Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, October 27, 2013**

It was the week before Christmas and traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike was heavy when a flat tire forced the driver of a sleek limousine to pull onto the shoulder. The chauffeur, who recently suffered a minor back injury, stood by the stranded car hoping someone would stop to help.

Finally a passing motorist did stop and offered assistance. The young man was pleasant and knew what he was doing. After quickly changing the tire the good Samaritan was thanked profusely by the chauffeur.

Suddenly a dark tinted window rolled down in the limo and the occupant asked what he could do to repay the favor.

“Just send my wife a big bouquet of flowers.” The chauffeur then got the man’s name and address.

Two weeks later a gorgeous bouquet of flowers arrived at the good Samaritan’s home, signed by a famous billionaire and his wife. The card simply read, “We paid off your home mortgage. Happy New Year.”

I suppose you might say this was one of those moments of unmerited grace, getting rewarded for doing nothing, or almost nothing.

The parable Jesus taught concerning the Pharisee and the publican teaches an important lesson about God having some petty funny ideas about who deserves and doesn’t deserve the graces he dispenses.

This parable is meant to shake up and challenge us to take a long, hard look at ourselves and reevaluate how we see ourselves and each other.

Let’s first take a look at our friend the Pharisee, a very formidable person.

There he stands, looking impressive. He takes his religion seriously. Listen to him again as he lists his formidable accomplishments:

“I fast twice a week. I give back a tenth of my income.”

Someone once said, “You know how important religion is to a person by the way it affects two areas in his life, his stomach and his wallet.”

There's no denying it, this Pharisee took his religion seriously. Obviously he was a man of persistent prayer, that's primarily what you do when you fast, you both pray and meditate on God's word. So, two days a week this Pharisee took the time and made the effort to put into practice what he preached.

Even more impressive this Pharisee was a tither, a ten percenter, disciplined in his giving to the church.

What preacher wouldn't want to have more members like that, someone who regularly prays and generously gives?

Let's now look at the Publican. This guy's a total mess. He doesn't pray much, he gives zero to the church. His life is one misadventure after the other. Not only that, he's the local tax collector, a collaborator and opportunist who betrays his neighbors by gouging them with taxes and fees for his bosses, the Romans, who ruled over Israel by force.

So, here we have side by side two individuals at opposite ends of the spectrum, as far away from each other as a young Mormon missionary and a violent drug dealer. One's a prince, the other a punk.

And yet Jesus only found redeeming qualities in the tax collector, because he was able to see something in this man what the rest of us can't or won't see, a crack in his broken self through which God can slip in.

You may be wondering why Jesus didn't praise the Pharisee. Here's why: the Pharisee saw himself as a self-made man in complete control of his life. He was so proud of himself he could never begin to see any of his faults. The tone of his prayer exposed his biggest failure, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like this tax collector."

I have a question for you, and when you answer, be honest. Do you ever catch yourself believing that you're somehow superior to the fall guy you compare yourself with?

Listen to yourself. "I don't know what's wrong with the lady next door. Her life is a mess, she can't hold down a job, her kids are one step away from reform school..."

Or

"Have you met the new guy? Why did the boss hire him in the first place? He looks like the dullest knife in the drawer!"

We always compare ourselves to each other. Sometimes we compare ourselves to people we think are better than us, especially those high-powered folks who make us feel envious and insignificant.

Then there're those we think are way below us because they make us feel superior.

In both cases, these comparisons do nothing to help your growth in Christ. When you compare yourself unfavorably, putting yourself down, you're forgetting you're a child of God, and God can see beyond your imperfections to the real you, someone God loves and accepts just the way you are.

On the other hand, when you stack your strengths against the perceived weaknesses of an unfortunate bystander you not only marginalize that person, you diminish yourself.

So, the Pharisee's fatal flaw that cancelled out his strengths was his lack of one endearing quality, humility.

Corrine Ten Bloom was asked if it were difficult to remain humble. She replied, "When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey and everybody was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road and singing praises, do you think for one minute it entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?"

Apparently this Pharisee's attitude was, "God needs me more than I need him." His prayer is actually a laundry list of his accomplishments to prove his self-importance. Don't we sometimes catch ourselves doing the same thing and from time to time need to fight this self-delusion? This can especially happen when we're doing oh, so well, personally and professionally. Everything, because of the cleverness of you is going your way, so you think, "I'm the best, at the top of my game. Nothing can stop me now."

But when your winning streak suddenly ends, and it will, something happens that finally breaks your spirit and brings you back to reality. You realize all your accomplishments don't add up to a hill of beans. You then feel insignificant and afraid because you think you've got nowhere to turn. But that's a good thing because that's when grace can happen.

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" The tax collector, standing far off, away from everybody, feeling out of place and out of control, couldn't even look up to show his face. Broken and unworthy he called out, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

That's why Jesus said, "The tax collector went down to his home justified, rather than the other," because the humble tax collector realized he had nothing to offer God except a terrible sense of his own unworthiness.

Jesus once taught, "I did not come for people who think they are well, but I did come for people who know they are sick." (Mark 2:17)

In our more honest moments, we'd all admit we're a conflicting combination of both the tax collector and the Pharisee. Very rarely is someone exclusively one or the other. And this sets the stage for that internal struggle forever waging within you between your real self vs. your false self.

Your real self is admittedly vulnerable and therefore open to God's grace. You know you don't have the power to save yourself let alone change yourself. You need the outside help that only Jesus can give. So you take it.

Maybe the next time you catch yourself comparing yourself to someone else you should remember that Jesus is the only one you should ever compare yourself with because Jesus is the only true barometer that can measure the quality of your soul. Of course, you'll never measure up to Jesus, but you can be freed from your obsession to prove yourself so you can accept yourself, if only because you are loved, not just for who you are now, but for who you can become by God's grace.

Believe it or not, this is a stewardship sermon. A steward is given the job of managing or taking care of someone else's property. Well, this morning the stewardship message is this: You belong to God, so take good care of yourself. Don't be like the Pharisee, so afraid of yourself that you hide your imperfections behind your self-delusions, you fool yourself into believing you're God's gift to the world.

Instead, be like the tax collector, ready to admit that without God's grace you're hopelessly lost, but with God's grace, that's when you can finally start realizing your self-worth and fullest potential as both a child of God and a disciple of Christ.

Knowing this is the beginning of your stewardship of the mysteries of God.

What are those mysteries? That God loves and accepts you just the way you are. What's more God has a plan for your life for your good and His glory that you can be more than you ever dared imagine, you can be more like Jesus, ready and willing to give yourself away in service to others, trusting you'll never be left with nothing, accepting challenges to love and serve by being a healing presence, a pillar of strength, and the salt of the earth, especially during unsettling times.

Especially now, it's essential to be a member of a faith community where you have a support system already in place. Because in community together, we can be co-stewards of God's mysteries as we support each other whenever we're tested or challenged and wait for the Holy Spirit to recenter us in Christ who helps us put everything in perspective and empowers us to "be Christian" as we draw strength from each other, and live out our faith by giving ourselves up to do great things for Christ and his kingdom, even if it costs us dearly.

A man was stopped by St. Peter at the Pearly Gates.

"Not so fast. Before I let you in you must tell me what great thing you have done for Jesus."

The man said, “How about this. I once saw a gang of skinhead bikers mugging a young mother with her baby in her arms. I went up to the leader and told him to stop it. I then kicked over his Harley.”

St. Peter was impressed. “That’s amazing. When did all this happen?”

The man replied, “Oh about three minutes ago.”

A humorous way to reintroduce a serious quote. Remember again what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Christ calls you, he bids you to come and die.”

When you are in Christ, when you invite Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, that’s when your false self, the Pharisee within you, begins to slowly die and with every passing day, by the grace of God alone, your real self takes root and grows. And all this time, as you are embraced by this amazing love and empowered to give yourself away, that’s when you become a steward of God’s mysteries.

Now, more than ever, let’s celebrate this calling, claim it and take it seriously so together as a faith community, we shall grow in Christ as we answer the calling to be stewards of God’s mysteries.

Let us pray!