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Luke 18:9-14
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A Sinner's Beatitude

While I read the parable from Luke's Gospel, I cannot get Paul's words out of my head. For All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

Today's parable of the religious leader and imperial collaborator comes between a parable of the persistent widow crying out for freedom, a wealthy young man who will be sent away empty, and Zacchaeus, a tax collector who gave away his possessions. So this parable sits at the line between asking for God's help and doing good things ourselves. What I think this parable is ultimately about is having the proper perspective. Pastor Barb said last week, to see the world through God's eyes. Because we're never going to do everything right or know everything. This uncertainty leaves room for me to bless people, instead of judging them.

Prayer: Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you. Our Lord turns the world upside down. Amen.

I stand before you as someone who is supposed to have something to teach you. I put in the hours and think I have some wisdom to offer. There are many ways I could preach this sermon, but I'm going to choose the one I think is the most correct. And I feel like the pharisee in this parable.

So what do I do? Do I sit down and hang my head low? (actually starts to do this). No no. But I do feel this text preaching to me about the dangers of pride that cast out others. Have any of you heard a sermon where you no longer felt like you belonged? Did it feel like the preacher was saying, thank God I'm not like those other people, and you felt included in the list of others?

I have heard those stories from many places and times. It does not need to be fire and brimstone, but can be as simple as not leaving space for people. Like being so rigid in my peace position that people with military families don't feel welcome. Or using theological or Mennonite jargon that makes people not in the know feel disoriented. Preaching is a risky act. Woe to religious leaders who bring judgment, because Jesus brings a blessing.

Which is why I always loved some communion-welcoming words. God welcomes everyone to his table, thieves, rogues, adulterers, and vagabonds. Come to the table of grace, This is God's table, it's not yours or mine. When Jesus sat at tables and broke bread with tax collectors, lawyers, rich elites, and poor presents, he proclaimed that God's gracious love and abiding presence knows no bounds.

As I think the sin of the parable's religious leader, I think the cure is the boundless love of Jesus. That no matter who you are, or what your experience in life may be. No matter what you believe or who you are, I commit to walking with you. Woe to religious leaders who bring judgment, because Jesus brings a blessing.

This brings me to the tax collector, the sinner. Jesus has a beautiful beatitude (or blessing) for them. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. It reads like one of the beatitudes of Christ's upside-down kingdom. Blessed are poor, meek, mourners, and hungry. How could Jesus be adding, blessed are the sinners to this list?

What if the blessing was something like this? Blessed is the person who knows that they are wrong, for they will see the light. Blessed is the person who pays back all he cheated like Zacchaeus, for they will be found. The blessing for the sinner is that a boundless table is always there to welcome the lost. The blessing of the sinner is that in truth we are all sinners. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And so as we try to navigate this complex world, as we give reparation to people we've hurt and make up for our mistakes, we have a boundless table that loves us for who we are. Woe to religious leaders who bring judgment, because Jesus brings a blessing.

I am struck here by the paradox of welcome and transformation. That Jesus ate with tax collectors without ever forgetting that they were a part of an oppressive system of imperial taxation that robbed the poor. How did he share table fellowship with the most contemptible? Maybe because the repentance of a contemptible sinner is worth more than the righteousness of a religious leader. That Jesus wants to overturn systems, instead of getting hung up on condemning individuals.

So I think this text is not calling me to hang my head, but to proclaim that there is amazing grace for even a wretch like me. Words from the hymn we are about to sing, written by an ex-slave trader. So if God is using tax collectors and slave traders then how much more will God use you? Did you not know that God's kindness and forbearance leads all people to repentance?