

A Change is Gonna Come
Luke 17:20-21; 18:9-14
Chris Clark

We love a great good guy/bad guy story right? Whether it's Luke Skywalker and the Rebel Alliance vs. Darth Vader and the Empire; or Liam Neeson vs. whichever group of eastern Europeans took his family this time; or if you were at a Phillies vs. Padres game, you go crazy after a Bryce Harper home run and you always, always, always boo Manny Machado stepping up to the plate. We are almost naturally drawn to delineating who is desirable and who is undesirable when it comes to the stories we love and, if we're honest, sometimes our real lives.

It's a trap we can easily fall into listening to this parable of Jesus. One pastor recently wrote a prayer that begins with "Wow what a hypocrite. What an egotistical, arrogant, judgmental person. God, thank you that I am not like this Pharisee – wait...oh crap."

Pharisees were not looked upon as hypocritical, pompous, elitist people in their day. They were part of a Jewish social movement that held fast to the teachings of the Torah, the Prophets, and other writings. As opposed to the Sadducees, who were the elitist group, they were held in good-will by common people. Tax Collectors, were not. These characters were treated as traitors who had aligned with the Roman empire, cheating people – even their own Jewish brothers and sisters – who were living in a colonized land. If there's a "bad guy", it's the Tax Collector.

But what makes Jesus's parable so surprising to his listeners is that at the end of the story, it is the traitorous, yet humbled, Tax Collector who goes home justified by God. No one would have guessed! But if we're paying attention, we should always expect some kind of surprise from Jesus. So we'd better not jump to a conclusion about who is the bad guy and who is the good guy because the very cause of Jesus's parable is a group of followers who are already doing that among themselves.

By all intents and purposes, this Tax Collector seems to leave the Temple in the good graces of God. But has he actually changed his ways? Will he leave the life he has been living, cheating people of their livelihood? Has he actually faced his own sin in forsaking God's covenant for a life that has become entangled with the oppression of the Roman Empire? Jesus leaves the question hanging.

I want to find hope in his parable. I'm willing to believe that a person like a Tax Collector who is willing to stand among some of the very people he may have cheated and prostrate himself before them and God is truly sorry for what he's done. I even wonder what drew him to the Temple to repent in such a dramatic way. Perhaps he had an encounter with a citizen whom he had cheated, which made him come to terms with his life. Someone who is willing to take a good hard look at their life like this, also needs someone to walk with them in pursuing true repentance, which looks less like a Get-out-of-jail-free card and more like a total reorienting of their life onto a more just and neighborly path.

Perhaps this is the Pharisees' misstep. Though he is not an arrogant hypocrite, perhaps he has missed an opportunity to walk alongside a brother or sister to follow through on their journey of repentance. The pharisaical movement of Jesus's time held the teaching of the prophets to be authoritative, and it's through the prophet Isaiah through which Luke kicks off Jesus's ministry – like to indicate that this is the lens through which the reader should be observing Jesus's life and teaching. The lens of good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, and liberation for the oppressed. This is the teaching the Pharisee would have upheld, so maybe his mistake was not joining God in liberating his brother or sister from practices that brought oppression. It would have been shocking to many that Jesus's story ends with the Tax Collector even repenting and seeking forgiveness. It may have even felt offensive that God would justify a person like that.

Right now there is an exhibition that is touring around the U.S. called *The F Word* exhibition. I'm talking about Forgiveness. The Forgiveness Project¹, an initiative founded in part by Desmond Tutu, has created this traveling gallery, which shares stories from victims, survivors and perpetrators of crime and conflict who have rebuilt their lives following trauma and hurt. One of the truths this gallery of stories shares is that forgiveness is both a choice AND a process. It's not just a one-time transaction, but a journey.

That's important to remember as the Tax Collector goes home forgiven and justified. God is not transactional but relational. Womanist theologian Dolores Williams writes a challenging claim that we need to consider: that Jesus's did not primarily come to save us through his death on the cross, but “to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relationships.”² What does it take to do the hard work of righting relationships? It takes humility. It requires letting go of security. If we're partnering with God, it's the work of becoming powerless for the sake of others. The quote on the front cover of the bulletin was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he sat in jail – our “act of faith

is something whole that involves one's whole life. Jesus calls us not to a new religion but to life...participating in God's powerlessness in the world."³

As uncomfortable as that thought may be, that is discipleship. Imitating Jesus looks like a release of the power that we desire to cling to. A couple years ago Angeley Crawford, a high school teacher who teaches at an inner city school in Washington DC, came to speak to our high school youth about racial justice. One of the questions we were asking was "Why is this important for our faith as Christians?" Because as imitators of Christ, it requires us to release the power and assumptions we, as white people, have to better understand the oppression black and brown people experience, to recognize our interconnectedness, and join in the work of God's liberating kin-dom. Often we too quickly want to jump to the resurrection without remembering the cross, which turns expectations upside down, releases power, and truly costs something real.

The parable Jesus tells is not of some cheap grace, as Bonhoeffer puts it. The world is tired of cheap grace. Teenagers starting movements are tired of the cheap grace of thoughts and prayers without action. Black and brown people are tired of the cheap grace of being tokenized and silenced. The poor, the oppressed, the captive, all deserve more than cheap grace. As gospel singer Mavis Staples sings, "What good is freedom, if we haven't learned to be free?"⁴ What good is grace if we haven't learned how to flesh that out? The God who justifies the Tax Collector is the God whose grace is bigger than we can ever imagine, transforming even those we'd consider outside of the bounds of grace. But as we see in the life of Jesus, the grace of God transforms not for the sake of the personal spiritual resume, but to draw us into deeper relationship with God who shows up as Christ in everyone we encounter. Deeper relationship that doesn't just come naturally, but costs us to entirely rethink how we are to relate to other people.

It's not our responsibility to change the world – that is the role of the Spirit. BUT we are called to love sacrificially – we have a choice in that. The new reality of the kin-dom of God is coming. Jesus doesn't end this parable with an "if" statement – he ends it with a vision of what is already on the way. The way he describes it is never in the power of human beings; it's always in the spirit of something that is coming whether we are ready for it or not; whether we like it or not, a change is gonna come. It won't be stopped by our intentional or unintentional actions. We might as well get on board. God's salvation, grace and justification is a liberating movement for the world – for the lives of those found to be least and last, as well as those who are considered greatest, exalted, or on top. And the way in which we experience the coming of God's kin-dom – whether it comforts us or discomfords us – will depend on where we find ourselves on that spectrum of the exalted and the humbled.

“The kingdom of God is among you”⁵ Jesus says. As much as we sometimes have a tendency to pull apart from one another – whether through apathy or contempt – it is in the humbled, often conflict filled, space of relationship where new life and possibility will show up. As the Church, we can hold these words as a nice sentiment, or we can accept them as our invitation to humble ourselves for the hard work of kins

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>

² Deloros S. Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion Of Redemption,” *After Patriarchy*, pp. 1-14.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, p. 482.

⁴ Mavis Staples, “Change,” *We Get By*

⁵ Luke 17:20-21http