



The Right, the Righteous, and the Reconciled

Luke 18:9-14 & Matthew 5:4

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There's little hiding that our national landscape is tense. It seems no one is willing to communicate across the aisle. And this isn't just a political issue – it is apparent that we are lacking in ability to share in community across racial identities, religious identities, and cultural identities (among others). As I named last week, I don't think our problem is that we disagree on *solutions* to problems, and it's not just that we can't agree on the problems, it's that we lack the civility needed to be share in dialogue with others so that we can name our problems and identify working solutions.

Admitting our corporate failure is hard, for we are a proud people, but if Christ comes to be a light in the darkness, to provide hope when hope seems lost, then clearly Christ has something to say about our inability to share in community with others. To look at what Christ has to offer, we're using the beatitudes, found in the Sermon on the Mount, to name how Christ calls us to *Be the Change* needed in society today.

And while I am grateful that our government employees are back to work, and they will be receiving back pay, let's not act like we're not still in a big mess as a nation. The negative impact upon furloughed employees will still be felt amidst the community. We hosted a meal for government employees in partnership with Fairlington and Roberts Memorial UMC this past Thursday at Meggrolls, a locally owned restaurant. Speaking with the owner, Megg, she offered that most of the owners around town were seeing a 20-30% drop in revenue in January. I could be wrong, but I don't see people eating out twice as much in the coming month as they did in December. What revenue our business have lost is just that, it's lost.

The financial impact of the shutdown may still be felt by many in the community, even after paychecks go out.

Again, I'm grateful that many of you are back to work, as are many others in our community. But let's not think that our problems are over. And let's not be so naïve as to think this lack of civility only rears its head in the halls of the Capital.

While quite visible in the District, this inability to engage with civility is not just a problem for our national leaders, or by partisan politics throughout the nation. Even we in the church, in the United Methodist Church, should hear the words of Christ in the beatitudes as critical for dealing with our own global identity.

I hope you've read the emails outlining what's happening in the United Methodist Church, but if you haven't, we are preparing as a denomination for a Special Session of the General

Conference, which will meet February 23-26, to identify a way forward for the United Methodist Church that brings unity and / or resolution to our thought and practice regarding human sexuality. As a global denomination, we have individuals who take every imaginable stance on LGBTQ inclusion, and, just as we see on the floors of Congress, we have shown that we are ill-equipped to engage with civility with those who have differing views in the church.

Regardless the arena, Christ's instruction in the Sermon on the Mount offers faithful instruction on how we are to engage with others. Christ teaches how we – individually – should live so that we – corporately – can live into the witness of God's will for creation.

Last week we looked at the beatitude that says blessed are the poor in spirit – those who have an impoverished spirit. To be dispirited is to name that we are united in our brokenness. No individual can offer the world salvation, save Christ. It is only Christ that can save us, that can redeem us ... it is only Christ that is capable of offering new life for us, through the power of God.

If Matthew 5:3 claims God's blessing on those who are poor in spirit, then sequentially, united in our need, we read in Matthew 5:4 that Christ offers, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Mourning is the expected outcome of those who are in need. Mourning is our response to being poor in spirit. Mourning is the expression of those who admit their brokenness. "Once we recognize the poverty of our spirit, we mourn our helplessness Mourning is the natural outflow of a poverty in our spirit."ⁱ

If we can first name our brokenness and our inability to save ourselves – if we have an impoverished spirit – then mourning our brokenness is an expected next step. And we mourn not just for our personal brokenness, we mourn the brokenness of society. We mourn that society doesn't look the way we think it should. Whether your vision of God's will is rooted in the Garden of Eden or the future Kingdom of Heaven, we are right to share in mourning that our national and global reality is far from either.

Anyone who has experienced personal loss knows the pain of grief and has likely spent time in mourning. Whether you have lost a loved one to death, or a community due to a move, or a job due to budget cuts – all who have experienced loss know the acute pain of mourning. And anyone who has known the pain of mourning is right to question Christ's proclamation, "Blessed are those who mourn"? How exactly is one supposed to see joy in a grief?

To better understand Christ's claim that "Blessed are those who mourn," we turn to our text in Luke 18.

A Pharisee and a tax collector go the temple to pray. ... Sounds like the start of a joke, right? Like, a Braves fan and a Phillies fan walk into a bar, and all the Nationals fans standing nearby laugh at the outcome of pain. ... But for Jesus telling the story, this is no joke, this is a parable.

This isn't a real story that took place, it's Jesus using real figures to claim a word of faithful discipleship.

The Pharisee, praying in the temple, gives thanks that *he* is faithful. "[He] manages to refer to himself in the first person five times in two verses."ⁱⁱ He gives thanks that his personal actions are righteous, self-praising that he fasts more than required, and that he gives a full tenth of his income. Like he's claiming, "I am the best; I am the most righteous; no one is more faithful than I." And then, he gives thanks that he's not like other people: adulterers, thieves, or even the tax collector who is nearby.

The tax collector is not far away; he is also praying. His prayer is simple, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Christ says that the one who goes home from the temple justified is the tax collector. Remember what I said last week about Luke always taking the side of the outcast or the generous? Here is just another example.

Read by the modern disciple, this text makes perfect sense. Jesus was always chastising the Pharisees, and this is just another example of him putting a Pharisee in their place (as we like to say). The Pharisee doesn't seem to think any ill of himself. He doesn't even seem to ask for God's support, or supplication, amidst his righteousness. He's haughty and lacks humility. And the tax collector? We know of tax collectors. Jesus chose to eat at Zacchaeus' house, and we know Christ has shown favor for such persons. But this understanding is only possible because we know the whole story. This is the story as we have *come* to know it. But this is not the parable as Jesus tells it. "If the Pharisee is pictured as a villain and the tax collector a hero, they each gets what he deserves ... and the parable is robbed."ⁱⁱⁱ

When Jesus tells the parable, he's telling it to Jews. If we're going to understand the weight of the parable, we have to hear it with their ears. The Jews to whom Jesus is speaking don't think of the Pharisees as hypocrites. They don't see the Pharisees as arrogant or self-righteous. For the Jews hearing Jesus' parable, the Pharisee can do no wrong. When Jesus says the Pharisee prays in this way, the Jews applaud. This man isn't just fasting for a sacred event, he's fasting more often – he's a saint. This man isn't like the others: the thieves, or the rogues, or the adulterers – he's a saint. As a Pharisee, this man comes from good stock, and is faithful as a leader among the Jews. He is one who sticks up for the Jews against the Roman empire. He's celebrated and revered.

Unlike the tax collector who is on the side of the Roman empire. The tax collector couldn't be hated more.

It's because they loved the Pharisee and hated the tax collector that Jesus' parable is so striking. The Jews believed they were on the right side of the parable, only to find out that the Pharisee is *not* the one Jesus praises – he praises the one they thought incapable of receiving God's praise.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” In the parabolic explanation, the Pharisee has nothing to mourn about. In Jesus’ telling of the story, the Pharisee has only words of praise to offer for himself. “If the Pharisee is confident in his righteousness, the tax collector openly addresses God from a position of moral destitution and unrighteousness, throwing himself upon divine mercy.”^{iv} Our impoverished spirit leads to mourning, which is the demeanor Christ says leads to reconciliation with God. It is the latter who is justified.

If in our 21st Century understanding of the Gospel, we hear the story and celebrate Jesus’ reversal – if we celebrate that the Pharisee is the one who receives the criticism given our preconceived notions of how much Jesus argued with the Pharisee – we are essentially the very thing Jesus warns about. If we are grateful that Christ puts the Pharisee in his place, then we are just like the Jews who are smug at the Pharisee claiming he was “not like the tax collector.”

“The problem, of course, is confusing our own righteousness with God’s. When these two are confused, we fall into ideological camps. Ideologies work through antagonists; they need an ‘other’ to work against, to hate, to dehumanize.”^v So the democrat points fingers at the republican, the American points fingers at the immigrant, the employed point fingers at the jobless, the housed point fingers at the homeless, the rural point fingers at the urban, the boomers points fingers at the millennials (and we all point back) ... and pretty soon everyone is pointing fingers at everyone else, just like the Pharisee who prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like the other people.” “We trust ourselves that we are right ... and righteous ... and begin to show others contempt.”^{vi}

“By contrast, the vision of the kingdom of God in Luke is one within which we all find ourselves on the *wrong* side of history. If the blessings of God’s justice are to be received, they must be received as pure mercy and grace, from a position of weakness, dependence, lack, and confessed injustice.”^{vii} The story calls out our desire for one-upmanship (or one-upwomanship?). It calls us out for our assumption that our faith, our religiosity, our political position, our genetic makeup, our cultural practices, our job, our everything is somehow better than that of others. As if our voting record, or our sexuality, or our perceived righteousness makes us more vindicated in the eyes of God than the other.

Yet, Christ says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” ... Christ says, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

“Truly, to pursue the justice of the kingdom, we must resist any attempt to present ourselves as standing on the ‘right side of history’ and, like the tax collector, learn to pursue it in humility from our moral destitution, breast-beating mendicants of divine mercy.”^{viii} We are called to be poor in spirit, and to mourn our brokenness.

And one might hear this invitation and think, what a miserable place to be in – to be so dispirited and filled with grief. Usually, when we see people so dispirited and filled with grief, we offer horrible platitudes to try and change their demeanor. Offerings like, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” Or, “They’re in a better place now.” Yet, Christ’s invitation to

faithful discipleship is not to see such brokenness as a fault; Christ says such acknowledgement is as a blessing. Blessed are those who are poor in spirit ... blessed are those who mourn. For these are the one who shall receive the kingdom of heaven ... these are the ones who will be comforted. This is the good news of Christ our Lord – that those who society likes to call broken, depressed, lost, or weak, Christ raises up as vindicated, justified, and reconciled. There is need for change, and Christ offers us the way. So let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

ⁱ Rob Lough. "For they Shall be Comforted." Ebenezerumc.org. Retrieved January 22, 2019.

ⁱⁱ David Lyle Jeffrey. *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Luke*. Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, as quoted by Gregory Allen Robbins. *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

^{iv} Alastair Roberts. "The Politics of Being on the Wrong Side of History." Politicaltheology.com. Retrieved January 22, 2019.

^v Eric Paul. "Luke 18:9-14." Aplainaccount.org Retrieved January 22, 2019.

^{vi} Paul.

^{vii} Roberts.

^{viii} Roberts.