

WHAT HOPE OF PEACE

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Luke 18: 9-14 - The Pharisee and the tax collector

This is Peace Sabbath, and our choir has led us in one of the profoundest prayers of the human soul--*Dona Nobis Pacem* ("Grant us Peace"). Our longing for peace is so universal and so close to our hearts. Today, therefore, being Peace Sabbath in honour of the founding of the United Nations, and also being combined with the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, I want to talk about peace both on the very individual level of our inner peace, as well as--at the opposite end of the spectrum--the level of global peace which is so much of a concern for us these days. World peace is so much of what the United Nations itself is about, as it is for the World Council of Churches.

I'm just giving you a little warning here because I'm pulling together threads from a number of different directions and I don't want you to get lost. Maybe there's greater concern about me getting lost! The story of the Pharisee is one of my favourites, and I think it contains so much dramatic poignancy. The Pharisees--who were they? They were the fundamentalists, the cleanest noses in town, and the self-righteous ones who had and followed all the rules and set themselves above everyone else. But they were kind of a pathetic lot because they lived with this terrible obsession, this perfectionism, this sense that they needed to do everything perfectly and to live within this very restricted little box. But for what purpose? In order to please God? In order to go to Heaven and not to Hell? They lived from some kind of deeply fearful place. And yet they were respected, they were the ones to whom people in some ways looked up, and they were honoured in their culture and in their religion. They were the Pharisees; they were the Bible-believing Jews of their time. Jesus was close to them. He loved them dearly, but as so often with the ones we love most dearly, he also came into conflict with them more than he did with anyone else, they challenging him and he them.

And then there is the tax collector. The tax collector is an epitome of the corruption of power. Tax collectors were given the power, the authority on behalf of the state which was Rome--foreign occupation, militarization--to collect the taxes. Of course, Rome was smart. They didn't send Romans to do that; they picked Jews. And so people felt the tax collectors were a kind of betrayal, were traitors. As well, tax collectors had bureaucratic power that enabled them to cheat people, to take bribes, and to benefit themselves at the expense of those who were powerless to do anything about it. In some ways, therefore, tax collectors were among the most despised.

So we have the Pharisee and the tax collector. Jesus took these two people, about whom there would be much strong feeling on both sides, and asked what would happen

when the two of them went into the temple or the synagogue to pray. The Pharisee, as we would expect of a good God-fearing Pharisee, would stand well away from the likes of the tax collector as well as the likes of many of the others--as a matter of fact, the likes of almost everybody else in the room. The Pharisee would stand there revelling in his own righteousness. The language of the parable is interesting. It talks about people who exalt themselves, who have a high opinion of themselves, who justify themselves--in other words, people who are self-righteous. You see, we talk about how God justifies us, makes us righteous--that is, forgives us and sets the relationship right. But the Pharisee would do that for himself, a sort of a do-it-yourself righteousness. So he would stand there, as proud and pumped up as he could be, complacent, really pleased with himself, with all those others in the room. He would be thanking God as if to say "I just thank you, God, that I'm not like them." So there's that side of the picture.

On the other side of the picture is this most despised tax collector--the one whom everybody hates, the one whom everybody knows is going straight to Hell. Even the prostitutes, the ne'er-do-wells, and all the others from whom the Pharisee would try to stand clear, avoid the tax collector. But then comes the twist. The tax collector feels his shame, and something has broken into his heart. He admits the truth, he realizes that he has really hurt many people, and he admits that truth about himself to God.

It's such a brief story isn't it? It's so cryptic. The Pharisee stands there primping his self-righteousness, and the tax collector begins to admit the truth about himself before God. And then Jesus says "So the two of them go home. Which one is happy? Which one feels at peace with God?" It's the tax collector, not the Pharisee. This parable turns the conventional view of righteousness upside down, right on its head. The Pharisee doesn't know who he is; he doesn't have an accurate perception of himself.

Scott Peck, quoting the fourteenth century mystic author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*¹, defines humility as knowing the truth about ourselves, knowing who we really are. We generally think of the ones who pump themselves, who have an exalted view of themselves, as needing more humility--needing to see themselves a little bit lower or on the same plane as everyone else. But Peck goes on to say that some people see themselves as lower than they really are, and keep putting themselves down. Peck gives the example of someone who might say he's a lousy writer. Well, he may in fact not be the best writer, but he may be a good writer. As another example, I might say I'm really a lousy preacher. Well, I may not be the best preacher, but I'm good. Sometimes people get trained to degrade themselves. In our culture, maybe not so much now but some decades ago, the Christian message about humility was distorted for many people because in general it was exactly what most men needed to hear. But it was not what most women needed to hear. Women tended to be taught to degrade themselves. Men were the ones who were taught to be proud and haughty. So setting ourselves lower than we actually are is mock humility; it's not true humility at all. We end up playing a little game called "Humbler than Thou": "Don't you just hate his humbler than thou attitude?" That's religious cattiness.

¹ M. Scott Peck, M.D., *Further Along The Road Less Traveled*, "The Unending Journey Toward Spiritual Growth" (Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 87.

What does it take just to admit the truth about ourselves? We can't do it by ourselves. There's a part of ourselves that needs to pretend something, that needs to concoct some artificial pretence, whether we're pretending that we're less than we truly are or more than we truly are. There needs to be another voice within our hearts that speaks against that pretence. And that voice must come from beyond us; it needs to be the voice we hear in prayer when we do the soul work, when we listen to the sacred. We need that voice to enable us to tell the truth about ourselves. And there's something about that moment when in prayer, or within whatever context, we can come to that place of saying "Yeah, ok, here's who I really am. I admit this is what I've done; I've got this remorse; I've got this talent; I'm good here; I'm bad there; this is just who I am; this is just me." There's something about that moment that brings us to the inner peace for which we all long. The hope of peace lies in that truth, and that is true humility.

If we take a message like that, how can we relate it to world peace? I believe that these fundamental principles of spirituality, human spirit, apply equally at all levels. I believe, therefore, there is a parallel that world peace somehow involves the nations of the world telling, admitting, the truth about themselves. Scott Peck in his *People of the Lie* talks about how people who live that pretence know at first that it is pretence. But they sometimes get beyond that knowledge and no longer know it's a lie. Scott Peck, as one of the most creative thinking psychologists of our time, says that is what evil really is. His understanding of true evil is getting to the point where we are living lies and no longer even know they're lies.

And just as we, individually, are so scared to be ourselves that a part of us somehow wants to pretend, so the nations and the economic powers of the world have this tendency to develop a pretence. They pretend they're not really doing what they're doing, and eventually they believe their lies. There needs to be a voice of the sacred that continually states the truth and brings the powers to admit the truth. That's the prophetic part of our ministry. As we begin thinking as a congregation, rethinking, thinking deeply, about our mission as a church, one of the things we need to realize is that the prophetic dimension of our ministry is something we have allowed to become weak. We need to reclaim that.

Here is a similar statement in the words of the World Council of Churches. I have so much respect for the World Council because it's the agency in which so many of our churches around the world come together to ask what this gospel is that we all hold together. The Council asks what the gospel has to say to our world and, divided as we are, what is the church's common presence? How do we hold this gospel in the world?

Here's another thread. Here's the place where the gospel connects to stewardship. Paul refers to us--the church--as stewards of the gospel, and it's this prophetic ministry that is so essential to the stewarding of the gospel in the world. It's the way in which the church brings the gospel to a world that, without the gospel, has no chance of true life.

I want to read from the report of the annual meeting this month of the United States member churches of the World Council of Churches in Atlanta, Georgia. The meeting was attended by the Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, W.C.C. General Secretary, who told the U.S. churches that "the U.S. is now the world's only superpower, [and that] it's policies and actions have consequences for every country in the world." He challenged the U.S. churches by telling them that the churches all around the world are watching and

depending on them to “continue to advocate for a responsible use of power, to speak truth to power.” This is the World Council of Churches challenging the churches of the U.S. “to speak truth to power.” The U.S. is the greatest power in the world, politically and militarily, and the gospel is the greatest truth, the greatest power for truth. In challenging the U.S. churches “to speak truth to power” he acknowledged that this responsibility becomes “difficult and risky.” Nevertheless, the churches worldwide “expect much from you, because indeed much has been given to you.” It’s important that “the vitality and creativity of peace and justice work in the U.S. [be grounded] “in spiritual discernment and prayer.”

At the opening worship of the same meeting the pastor of the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, Rev. Dr. Joseph Roberts, underlined the responsibility of the U.S. churches by quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. who said “true love is a painful embrace.”

I want so badly for the churches to hear that message, not just in the U.S. but also in Canada and everywhere else, because part of our Judeo-Christian heritage is the role of the prophet who speaks in dialogue with the ones who hold power. The reason is that it’s not possible for human beings to hold power by themselves without that power becoming corrupt, without it becoming pretence and illusion, without the wielders of that power doing horrible things that they don’t admit they’re doing. And it is up to the churches to speak the truth to that power, not to take ideological or even moral positions. Those positions do get involved but they’re not the essence. The essence is the church simply saying the truth out loud, exposing it in the face of all the wielders of power; just saying the truth and to keeping on saying the truth, turning on the light in the face of the powerfull who can do what they keep on doing only in the dark. It’s just saying the truth out loud so that at least somebody is saying it, so that the powers can’t keep on doing what they’re doing without admitting the truth about what they’re doing. And that’s profound good news for us. It’s good news that God has given this mission to the church--the opportunity for true peace, true world peace, which can be had only as the nations of the world see and admit and face the truth about what they’re doing, and act out of that truth.

That’s the way world peace becomes possible, just as our inner peace becomes beautifully, richly, joyously, possible when we simply admit the truth about ourselves. When the churches reclaim their prophetic role, then, but not until then, will there truly be hope for peace in our world.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor