

Made Right by a Merciful God

There is a story told in “A Treasury of Jewish Folklore” worth repeating:

“Once there was a rabbi who was at the point of death, so the Jewish community proclaimed a day of fasting in the town in order to induce the Heavenly Judge to commute the sentence of death.

On that very day, when the entire congregation was gathered in the synagogue for penance and prayer, the town drunkard went to the village tavern for some schnapps. When another Jew saw him do this he rebuked him, saying, "Don't you know this is a fast-day and you're not allowed to drink?

Why, everybody's at the synagogue praying for the rabbi!"

So the drunkard went to the synagogue and prayed, "Dear God! Please restore our rabbi to good health so that I can have my schnapps!"

The rabbi recovered, and it was considered a miracle. He explained it in the following way: "May God preserve our village drunkard until he is a hundred and twenty years! Know that his prayer was heard by God when yours were not. He put his whole heart and soul into his prayer!"

Jolting isn't it?

A little politically incorrect, kind

of uncomfortable...
that's exactly how Jesus' parable
ought to make us feel...

If that story doesn't
transport you into today's
parable, try this:

The Economist recently did
a survey to find out what the
two most respected professions
were
—they were **nurse** and **solider**.
On the flip side, the two least
respected professions in America
were
used car salesperson and
politician.

So, there once was a
combat medic and a **car**
salesman turned Senator who

both entered the national
cathedral.

The Combat Medic prayed,
“I've got people out of hairy
situations from Granada to
Mogadishu to Kabul
—I've patched up the
unpatchable,
and on top of that I'm a tithing
member in good standing at my
congregation,
and I just thank God I'm not
some creepo,
like that guy over there.”

That guy over there, was of
course, the senator-car
salesman, and he simply prayed,
*“God, be merciful to me, a
sinner!”*

Get this, it was the second
man that was made right.

Let us pray

I offered those two brief re-tellings of Jesus' parable, because there is a peril in reading a 2000-year-old story flat, without accounting for all that time it traveled to get here.

“**Pharisee**” is now often used as an insult, right? But in Jesus day the Pharisees were the folk trying to ensure everyone, whether they lived in Jerusalem, or hundreds of miles away, whether they were priest or pauper... were able to be faithful to God. They re-interpreted scripture so it was accessible to everyone... some people go so far as to argue Jesus himself was a Pharisee...

so when Jesus is telling this story, we're supposed to hear this first character as an upstanding individual.

Likewise, while there is often some grumbling about **tax collectors** every year around April 15th, in Jesus' day there was a lot more than grumbling... Tax Collectors were Jewish agents of Rome, sympathizers, quislings, lackeys getting rich off their kin-folk's cruel repression.

The upstanding religious man exalts in his good name, he is self-satisfied and confuses his respectability with

righteousness.

More than that, it divides him
from his fellow worshipper,
it makes him think himself better
than the other man...

It makes you wonder how
religion
—seeking to be bound to the
Holy
—can get so twisted...

as Jonathan Swift, the author of
Gulliver's Travels once penned:
*"We have just enough religion to
make us hate, but not enough to
make us love one another."*

The man of disrepute,
however, knows his lack,
the ways he has fallen short;
he acknowledges his own
unrighteousness.

It strikes him to the bone.

But he does not hide it
—he does not try to put his best
foot forward out of fear of God,
he does not try to curate his life
for God's sake ...
no, he knows all is not well and
comes to God without mask or
costume...
just as he is.

The Tax Collector, unable
to do anything but repent,
is able to trust...
perhaps simply hope...
that God is merciful.

Maybe he remembered his
grandmother reading him a
Psalm about birds resting on
God's altar,
sparrows and swallows nesting
in God's temple

—finding home, finding rest
there for weary wings...

There, at the temple, he is
made right, he goes home
justified...

the humble are exulted

—this is par for the course for
Luke

—Luke who records Mary's song,
*"God my Savior shows favor to
the lowly,
the proud are scattered,
the humble are uplifted."*

You don't need to hide
your true self,
though your troubles and trials,
sins and missteps, may be many
—**God already knows them, and
does not reject you.**

Pastor Sarah, my Pastor
growing up, used to always say,
"Whenever you draw a line in
the sand meant to exclude, you'll
find Jesus on the other side."

I thank God for her wise words
—growing up is hard enough,
without thinking God is against
you too!

God does not reject you,
instead when he finds us just as
we are,

God is moved and makes things
right,
justifies us,
because God loves us!

The comforting embrace of Love
is the only space from which
meaningful transformation can
occur—not fright or self-
righteousness or punishment or
judgement... only love

transforms!

By the power of the Holy Spirit
we're able to trust that promise
—able to come before our loving
Father and pray to God as
Martin Luther prayed all those
years ago:

*Behold, Lord, an empty
vessel that needs to be filled. My
Lord, fill it.*

*I am weak in the faith;
strengthen me.*

*I am cold in love; warm me
and make me fervent, that my
love may go out to my neighbor.*

*I do not have a strong and
firm faith; at times, I doubt and
am unable to trust you
altogether.*

*O Lord, help me. Strengthen my
faith and trust in you.*

*In you I have sealed the
treasure of all I have.*

*I am poor; you are rich and
came to be merciful to the poor.*

*I am a sinner; you are
upright. With me, there is an
abundance of sin; in you is the
fullness of righteousness.*

*Therefore, I will remain
with you, of whom I can receive,
but to whom I may not give.
Amen.*