

“Godspell: The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee”
Luke 18:9-14

Today we look at another parable Jesus told to transform people’s expectations and norms. The first parable in this chapter is about the persistent widow and the shock of having the lowest of the low in society as the example of faith. The same is true of the parable for this week. Another example of faith that is lifted up is that of an unexpected hero, a tax collector who would have been seen as an example of lack of faith. The parable for today highlights the importance of openness and humility which are often hard for people who feel self-righteous. This reminds me of a joke. Once there was a lion. The lion was proud of his mastery of the animal kingdom. One day he decided to make sure all the other animals knew he was the king of the jungle. He was so confident that he bypassed the smaller animals and went straight to the bear. “Who is the king of the jungle?” the lion asked. The bear replied, “Why you are, of course” The lion gave a mighty roar of approval. Next he asked the tiger, “Who is the king of the jungle?” The tiger quickly responded, “Everyone knows that you are, mighty lion.” Next on the list was the elephant. The lion faced the elephant and addressed his question, “Who is the king of the jungle?” The elephant immediately grabbed the lion with his trunk, whirled him around in the air five or six times and slammed him into a tree. Then he pounded him onto the ground several times, dunked him under water in a nearby lake, and finally dumped him out on the shore. The lion-beaten, bruised, and battered-struggled to his feet. He looked at the elephant through sad and bloody eyes and said, “Look, just because you don’t know the answer is no reason for you to get mean about it!”

Self-delusion is one of the oldest tricks in the book of the human ego and we all fall for it. It is also one of the barriers for us to be able to enjoy the presence of God in daily life. The ego insists on things like being right, getting recognition, playing it safe, comparing ourselves to others, putting others down to feel better about ourselves, doubting ourselves and our worth. Another form of self-delusion is not recognizing our true worth as the beloved children of God. We live most of our lives striving to earn love, recognition, power, or security because we don’t live out of the eternal grace of our inner being. One perfect example for that is the story of Harry Potter who grew up thinking that he was just an ordinary boy. He was a wizard, and a tremendous one at that! His relatives who took him in after his parents died, abused him and kept that knowledge hidden from him. And the worst part is that he believed it. Here is the scene of when he discovers his true identity when one of the wizards finds him: <https://youtu.be/-oU4b7OPbA>. It took a lot of time for him to really accept this truth.

Into such human insecurities, fears, conflicts, forgetfulness of who we truly are, and self-delusions comes the message of the good news of God to help break our self-defeating cycles of suffering. God does not leave us orphaned or without guidance. God provides us with teachings, stories, and people to show us the way. Jesus gave this parable about the publican and the pharisee to help his followers break the cycles of self-delusion. It is also still good news for us because we struggle with the same issues.

Our Bible story for today is about Jesus challenging his disciples and followers to practice genuine humility and openness to God. In this passage from Luke 18, Jesus tells a shocking parable about two men who went to pray. The shock comes to us when we see that the person who is supposedly a terrible person is the one who is truly open to God's guidance and revelation. The first man, a Pharisee, is portrayed as someone who is self-righteous. This would have been shocking to the people at the time because Pharisees were seen as the good religious leaders in Jesus' time. Unlike the stereotypes we tend to have of them, Pharisees, like Jesus, had a passion for the renewal of Israel and getting away from the exploitation and domination systems of the Roman Empire and the religious leadership of the temple. They were "the good guys" in those times. The tax collector in the story represented those who were hated by the people of Israel at the time. The actual translation for the Greek word *telones* is actually toll collector and not just a tax collector. Toll collectors in those times were in a way worse than tax collectors. Tolls were collected for a variety of things such as using certain roads, selling your produce in the market, fishing, and exchanging money for Temple coins. The people who collected the tolls were paid very little, but it was legal for them to extort and swindle money from poor peasants by overcharging for tolls. This would have been a "legal graft." Toll collectors were the worst-case scenario of tax collectors!

The parable shocks us by showing us how the unexpected happens in the kingdom of God. The normally "bad" person, the toll collector, is the person who is truly humble and open to God, while the normally "good" person, the Pharisee, is the one who is arrogant and closed to God. This parable was supposed to shock people to realize that it is not enough for the kingdom of God to have acts of devotion. What is truly important is the openness of our hearts to the love of God with humility knowing that the unexpected does happen in the kingdom of God. The transformation which Jesus talked about was something that would transform our whole lives into being open to grace and the ways of love and life. It turns our worlds upside down. Faith is not about having a good set of beliefs and some moral actions and values to go with it. Faith is not about ensuring that we have a good spot in heaven. It does not make us better than others. It does not put us above making mistakes. It does not even make us more special. Faith is about the continual opening of our lives to God's loving presence. It is about living each moment as an opportunity for love and growth. It is not about proving ourselves worthy. It is about living in the knowledge of our true worth.

If we allow the love of God to transform our hearts, we would find ourselves more open to others. This does not mean that we accept whatever people do or say to us. But it would mean being open to seeing others as children of God even when we disagree with them. In his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel Heart*, Thomas Keating writes, "Practice unconditional acceptance of others. This practice is especially powerful in quieting the emotions of the utility appetite: fear, anger, courage, hope, and despair. By accepting other people unconditionally, you discipline the emotions that want to get even with others or to get away from them. You allow people to be who they are with all their idiosyncrasies and with the particular behavior that is disturbing you. The situation gets more complicated when you feel an obligation to correct someone. If you correct someone when you are upset, you are certain to get nowhere. This arouses

the defenses of others and gives them a handle for blaming the situation on you. Wait until you have calmed down and then offer correction out of genuine concern for them."

Genuine humility and openness to God and to others are not about having a low self-esteem where we think whatever we know and say is not really worthwhile. This kind of humility is not about being weak or having no strong convictions and commitments. True humility is about the ability to be open to new ways of seeing and doing without feeling threatened in the process. It is about trusting that God speaks to us in new ways all the time and we have to be open to receive these new gifts.

We are going to close with an exercise based on Joyce Rupp's book *Open the Door*. The first reflection in the book is about identifying the door. She quotes Drew Leder about the image of a door, "A door is truly an amazing thing. Closed, it is an agent of separation...But swing it open and it becomes an invitation, uniting what before was separate." So the invitation is for each of us to reflect on the door to our hearts. Is it a door that shuts people and God out or is it a door that invites and unites? Is it a door that looks good on the outside like that of the pharisee's heart or is it a flexible door that allows plenty of space to welcome new growth? What does the door of your heart look and feel like? Take a moment to imagine or draw that door being specific about the kind of door it is. Does this door assist or hinder your spiritual growth? Now take a few deep breaths and imagine or draw the Holy One coming and opening this door. What did you notice? What did you learn about your door?

We will conclude with a prayer:

Companion of my growth,
Many are the turns and tumbles
Of my ever-changing life.
As I find my way on the journey
Of spiritual transformation,
I trust that your abiding presence
Will guide and guard me.
I open the door of my heart to you.
I open the door. Amen.