“A Mercy that Covers All”

Preached at the Wollaston Congregational Church

On October 23rd, 2016

Focus scripture: Luke 18:9-14

Have you heard the story? Of the Pharisee and the tax collector? Those two exaggerated characters from Jesus’ time?

Philip the Pharisee goes into the temple to pray. He’s a little out of his element he’s not a temple priest, nor is he a synagogue leader. He is teacher, respected in the village community. None the less, going to the temple to pray is a good thing for a devout Pharisee to do.

And Philip is an excessively devout Pharisee. While the law says that certain things are subject to tithing, such as mint, dill and cumin, not everything need be tithed. But this Pharisee tithes everything! Ten percent of everything he has: animals, home, clothing, he gives to the temple!

And while the law only requires fasting on certain holy days, Philip fast two days *each* *week*. This really is over and above the call of duty. Philip is certainly a very devout Pharisee, perhaps striving in all his religious excess for forgiveness for the sins of the people. For Jews, in the time of Jesus, religious rites and prayers are communal. They are intended for the good of the entire community.

Even so, the prayer he offers in the temple today is not a prayer of confession. It is a prayer of gratitude. Perhaps it’s a little me-focused … but it’s a “there but for the grace of God go I” kind of prayer.

Philip is grateful for his own devotion, even proud of it. His gratitude is reinforced when he sees the humble tax collector hanging back in the shadows.

Now there is the tax collector, Thomas. The words “humble” and “tax collector” don’t usually go together. These were the extortionists of their time. As collaborators with the Roman occupiers, they were not known for humility. They pressed the poor to give in excess of their dues, and creamed off money for themselves. They were not usually seen in the temple and certainly not usually seen making a confession.

But it seems that Thomas has seen the error of his ways and is ashamed. He has come to the right place to confess his sins to God and

to seek atonement. Beating his chest with grief, at the extent of his sins, he knows that he needs to throw himself on God’s mercy.

Then comes the moral of the story. Perhaps, if Philip the Pharisee was able to step out of his role, to observe the mind of God, he would be quite surprised. Because both men, yes you heard correct, I said *both men* went home justified – right with God.

I expect you’ve heard the story before. But I wonder if you have ever heard it that way. It’s usually told a little differently and to explain myself I need to delve into a little Greek. I don’t usually do this when I preach, but today it is important.

Most English translations of the passage we read say that the tax collector went home justified, *rather than* the other: the Pharisee. That is the way I have always heard the story.

But Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament presents an alternative. The words that are traditionally translated as “rather than that one” --- para ekeinon --- may also be translated as “alongside that one”. The preposition “para” can mean “rather than” but it can also mean “to set side by side”. Think of the words parallel, paradox, or parable. Levine sees this phrase, that concludes Jesus’ parable as being the punchline. It is the surprise in the parable. As she says, Jesus was a challenging teacher. The outcome of the parable is unlikely to be a simple repetition of reversal of roles that the gospel of Luke is so fond of. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Of course, the theme of the passage is confession and forgiveness.

Those things involve change, even transformation. A long standing part of our tradition, is testimony. This is a time when someone talks of how they experienced transformation in their own lives. It’s about times when the mercy of God broke through and led a person from one way of being to another. And I’d like to talk about that .. to testify to you .. today.

There was a time, quite a few years ago, when I had everything that I thought I wanted. Three wonderful, healthy children, a beautiful home, a hardworking and caring husband. Things had worked out just as I had hoped and planned. I had my part-time job, so I could continue in my career, without missing out on being a mom. We had the children in music lessons and sports, but not to a crazy extent. I volunteered with my daughter’s girl scout troop, taught Sunday school on the rotating schedule, and had a group of women friends I could talk to.

But, I felt that something, something big, was missing. I was unhappy. I also felt guilty, I felt guilty for feeling unhappy. Because it seemed that I was so ungrateful for all that I had. And so, every week when we went to church and the prayer of confession came around my prayer would be: “God, I am so fortunate, I have everything I could want or need, forgive my lack of gratitude. Make me grateful!” And I would say thank you for the things I had in life. It was genuine, but still I felt unhappy.

My husband reminded me that we knew many people who were much less fortunate than us.

I had a friend who was married about the same time as my husband and I told me her husband had left her and she was getting a divorce, and I thought “there but for the grace of God go I.”

And there was a friend we used to enjoy the fine things of life with. But then it became apparent, he was an alcoholic. He could not or would not admit it. All we knew was he was frequently admitted to the hospital, and he lost his job. And I thought “there, but for the grace of God go I.”

Then, a former colleague told me of the deterioration of the work environment, since I left the company. A corporate takeover and internal departments set up in fierce competition. Co-workers were ganging up on her trying to force her out. And I thought “there, but for the grace of God go I.”

But for all that praying “there but for the grace of God…” I was no better. I stressed about getting home on time to get my kids to their activities. I stressed about putting a decent meal on the table daily.

I stressed about my husband traveling frequently in those troubling times, post 9/11, and whether he would be safe.

My anxiety manifested itself in tense muscles: neck, shoulder and back pain. Finally I began to see a chiropractor, and she gave me some interesting advice. First of all, she told me I was breathing from my chest, and should breathe from my belly. She told me to relax. When it seemed I may have been low on potassium and calcium she suggested I ate banana splits. After a number of visits I was still tense, so she said to me, “you know, Liz, everything is going to be alright”.

My eyes filled with tears. It was a turning point. I had been trying to hold it all. But my arms were not big enough. I thought that if I was responsible for everything, if I kept up my end of the bargain, things would be OK. But, I simply could not be enough for my own expectations.

I needed to learn to trust God.

I picked up the book “The Relaxation Response,” by Herbert Benson M.D. and [Miriam Z. Klipper](https://www.amazon.com/Miriam-Z.-Klipper/e/B001IGJXQW/ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_1?qid=1477082411&sr=1-1), in the gift shop of the hospital where I was working. It was a revelation. I learned to breathe, when I felt stressed, and to pace myself so that I responded instead of reacted. I bought a journal with a beautiful Monet print on the cover, because looking at it calmed me. A wise friend told me, when one of your kids asks you if they can do something, ask them to give you time to think. Tell them that the answer is more likely to be “yes” if you have the time to think it over. The tightness in my chest loosened.

This journey led me to seek out my deeper purpose with God. And that eventually led me to be here, ministering with you.

Recently I prayed with another minister, our hands rested on the shoulders of a third woman. The minister prayed “know that you are enough … know that God created you just the way you are…”

You know, I think that Philip the Pharisee, in the parable probably does not think he is enough. He keeps trying to fulfill his “responsibilities” to make atonement for the people of Israel: fasting, praying and tithing to extremes. He is trying to be grateful,

offering that “there but for the grace of God…” prayer. At least he isn’t like the tax collector.

But, he hasn’t taken in the fact that God’s mercy already has all of the sins covered. The sins of extortion and robbing the poor, the sins of trying to do too much, the sins of forgetting that God is God and you are not.

I hope there is someone there in the temple who will put hands on Philip’s shoulders, as he is turning to leave, and say “everything’s going to be alright, you are enough… may you live as the beloved one God created you to be.”

And Thomas, the tax collector. He knows he hasn’t lived the life God intended for him. But he throws himself on God’s mercy. It is his only hope, like an addict who has hit rock bottom. And so, I sure hope there is someone there in the temple to lay hands on Thomas’s shoulder and say “everything’s going to be alright … you are enough … may you live as the beloved one God created you to be.”

And so I say to you … you are enough.

May you live the life, whole and free from anxiety, that God intends for you, God’s beloved.

Amen

1. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, HarperOne 2014, 192 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)