

*Father Stephen's Sermon ✠ October 27, 2019*

After we were married, Rayelenn and I lived in the small market town of Alnwick, Northumberland, set in the border country of Scotland and England. Most Americans have never heard of Alnwick, yet when visiting England likely passed it on their way from London to Edinburgh. If you watched the first Harry Potter film, you'll have visited Alnwick Castle, where Harry and his friends learned to fly their broom sticks. Rayelenn and I lived, just round the corner from Alnwick Castle.

During our time in Alnwick, Rayelenn and I befriended an elderly couple, Ted and Cathy Bell. Ted was deaf, and registered disabled, which is likely what attracted us to them in the first place. Because of his deafness, Ted could not find work, and Cathy was pretty much disabled also, so they both lived on "welfare". Rayelenn and I employed Cathy as a part-time housekeeper, and Ted used to walk our dogs, and they looked after our house when we were away.

Just round the corner from the castle was the church we all attended. St. Michael and St. Paul was your classic 12th century Anglican church. The congregation was made up of the kinds of folk you find in a small market town, some professional - teachers, doctors, bank managers and the like, as well as "blue collar", miners, shopkeepers, retirees, and so on. They were all good folk, faithful to their church, to each other, and to God. Rayelenn and I look back with great fondness to our time in Alnwick.

But like all good folk, they had their faults. Ted and Cathy told us one time how they felt ignored by the congregation - not quite shunned, but despised, looked-down-upon, considered other. Maybe it was because Ted and Cathy were poor; they did not dress well, and being poor their personal hygiene was questionable. But, it certainly seemed that nobody talked to them; they sat at the back of the church every Sunday, and aside from Rayelenn and me, and the clergy, were totally ignored. I thought of Ted and Cathy when I read the Gospel lesson for this Sunday.

Our first lesson from Ecclesiasticus, or to give it its full title, The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, is a book about the general truths of religion - how we respond to God and each other. Ecclesiasticus writes of God's impartial love, merciful, all encompassing, and our response to it. The Book of Ecclesiasticus naturally directs us to the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus told this parable as an object lesson *to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt*, and to show us what the true attitude of humans towards each other and to God should be.

In its wider context, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is really Jesus's teaching about prayer and the Divine reversal. It is an example of God's mercy, shown to a sinner who acknowledges his own worthlessness, in contrast to a Pharisee who seems to be praying to himself.

Now, lest we be too harsh, Jesus/Luke paints this parable in sharp contrasting colours. The Pharisee is not a "bad guy," he's not a thief or a villain. He was absolutely right in the manner he fulfilled his religious obligation - he fasted, he tithed. We get the impression the Pharisee is an educated man, a member of the elite, respectable, someone who followed the Mosaic Law - a model citizen, we might say. Someone who would fit right in to an All Saints, Hershey, or a 12th century church in a small market town in England. The problem is, he knew it; and couldn't stop crowing about it. He was, we might say, full of himself.

In contrast, the tax collector had nothing to commend him. In the eyes of the world in which he lived, he was at the opposite end of the spectrum, a "bad guy," a profiteer, a collaborator with the Roman occupiers; a traitor, banned from Jewish social and religious life; in short, the worst of sinners, a person to be held in contempt.

At its heart this story about the upright and the worthless, is a story about humility. The Pharisee - whose obedience to his tradition was unquestioned - had more of pride about him than thankfulness. He laid his merits before God, and then compared himself to the tax-collector: he boasted: "I am not like other people."

Whereas, in the eyes of Jesus, the tax collector was more upright before God simply because in humility, he threw himself on God's mercy; he knew he was a sinner; so Jesus loved him.

How do we measure God's grace, God's love for us expressed in Jesus? For the Apostle Paul, God's grace is measured not through intellectual speculation, but in our lives, in the moments and event of our days. "My departure has come," the Apostle Paul writes. "I have fought the good fight...finished the race...kept the faith." Through it all Paul never lost faith in God; never lost faith in Jesus. So even when it seemed everyone had deserted him, St. Paul could still say to Timothy: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil...and save me for his heavenly kingdom."

For all his protestations, one can't help but think St. Paul was not the most humblest of the Apostles. Likely he would have agreed with St. Augustine of Hippo, who centuries later observed that: "...the very perfection of a person [is] to find out our own imperfections." More times than we like to admit, we are blind to our own behaviour. I think this was the problem in St. Michael's and St. Paul's in Alnwick and the attitude of some people towards Ted and Cathy. All good folk, to be sure, honest to God, and they thought, honest to themselves and each other. The problem is that there is a little of the Pharisee in all of us, and more of the tax-collector than we care to admit.

How do we measure God's grace, God's love for us expressed in Jesus? The wise mystic Julian of Norwich had this to say about Divine love:

*The Lord looks on his servants with pity and not with blame. In God's sight we do not fall: in our sight, we do not stand. Both of these are true; but the deeper insight belongs to God.*

*Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love (Ch. 82).*

It all comes down to humility and how we pray. Amen