



Justified By God: Our Default Setting – Touchpoint for October 19, 2022

Luke 18:9-14 (NRSVUE) *The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* - ⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

TOUCH POINT

¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

¹⁴ I tell you, this tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

With all due respect to Jean-Paul Sartre, this parable could be called “No Exit.” I feel like I am trapped inside of it, and every attempt I make to dissect and diagnose it leaves me in worse shape than when I started.

I mean, the easy thing is to say, “Don’t be like the Pharisee.” But then I end up being like the pastor I heard, who after giving a sermon on this passage, finished by saying, “Let us pray,” and then began his prayer, “Thank you God, that we are not like the Pharisee.”

Well, thank God I’m not like that pastor who thanked God he wasn’t like the Pharisee. Who thanked God he wasn’t like the tax collector.

You see what I mean. There is no escape. We are constantly caught up in the “I’m glad I’m not like them” approach to life. I’m glad I’m not like the Pharisee, who’s glad he’s not like the tax collector. And I’m glad I’m not like those fundamentalists who think they are better than others. I’m glad I’m better than that.

And it isn’t like there is anything wrong with the Pharisee. I would have given my right arm to have people like him in the churches I served. People who give a tenth of their income. The church would be in much better shape with more people like him.

Instead, I had more people who were like the tax collector. They would come and confess their sin on Sunday and then head back home and go right back to being their same old selves. Only to come back the following Sunday and do it all again. Some didn’t even wait to get home. As one parishioner told me about another parishioner whom he had accidentally cut off on the way home from church... God’s name was invoked, but not in a churchly way.

But at least the tax collector is humble. Maybe I can sink my teeth into that. Maybe I should just tell you to be humble, because as one commentary I read said, “Think of the glory that awaits you for being humble!”

Or as one person said in a bible study I once led, “After reading this parable I am going to make it my goal to be the most humble person who ever lived.”

I guess we should have a competition to see who is the greatest at being humble!

But the tax collector isn't trying to be humble. He isn't focused on himself. Humility is not his goal.

You see what I mean. There is no escape. No matter who I want to be like or not be like, in this parable I am stuck. And maybe that is the point.

It doesn't come down to being righteous. It doesn't come down to being humble. It doesn't come down to being righteous or humble. It doesn't even come down to "Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better" at being righteous or humble.

Because those are descriptions of us. And ultimately it doesn't come down to us. Sorry, I hate to break it to you, but it is not all about you, and it is not all about me.

And that's what makes this parable so difficult. Our righteousness, our goodness, our trying to get better... counts for NOTHING! Even our trying to be humble!

It's about the grace of God. The mercy of the Mystery.

It doesn't matter whether you're righteous or not. It doesn't matter if you're getting better at being righteous or not. It's not about you.

Justification is not about who you are or what you do. Justification comes from the Mystery, and the Mystery alone.

Now I must confess, I never really understood what the word 'justified' meant until I got a computer. And it was a really big word in seminary, especially a Lutheran seminary. But the word always seemed a little vague to me. I couldn't clearly define it. Kind of like the word 'righteous,' which is also in the passage for today. And on a short side note, because I have no answer, the Pharisee is definitely righteous but it doesn't seem to help his justification. In fact, it gets in his way. Go figure. I always thought my sin got in the way of my justification, but apparently so does my trying to be righteous.

Anyway, back to justification. The meaning of the word finally hit home with me when I got a computer. Which means, YES, I went to seminary before computers.

Now, I remember when I first got a computer and I needed to set up the defaults. And one of the questions the computer asked was, "How do you want to justify the lines on the page?"

WHAT?! I need to justify the lines on my computer? I was in the business of justifying myself! Why do I need to bother with my computer?

But it was asking me how was I going to properly align my writing? How were my words going to be properly aligned with the page and the other sentences on the page?

And it hit me: Justification means being properly aligned. From a theological perspective, how am I properly aligned with God, with the Mystery, with the world and others?

And the answer is: God has already done it and God is constantly doing it.

I can't do it myself. I have no more power, no more free will to properly align myself than the sentences I write on a page do.

Think of those sentences. Someone has to align the lines for them. They can't do it themselves. Even if they are very good sentences. Even if they are righteous sentences. And I've written some really righteous sentences in my life. Just ask me, if I may humbly say so myself... Sometimes I'm both the Pharisee and the tax collector at the same time.

And it doesn't even matter if they are bad sentences. Sinful sentences. Wrong sentences.

It doesn't matter if they continue to be sentences that are incorrect. They can neither align themselves nor unalign themselves. I can write the most ungrammatical sentences in the world and they can still be properly justified.

And so it is with the sentences of my life. And my life's story. They may be righteous sometimes. They may miss the mark over and over again at other times.

But the Mystery is the judge who issues the final sentence of my life, and that is this:

“I am justified. I am properly aligned. I belong. I am God's 'Beloved Child.'”

And that has been my default setting from the day I was born. I have no more power to undo it than the lines on my page have the power to change the settings on my computer.

If God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being, then the sentences of our lives, our stories, move and have their being within the properly justified setting of God's Book of Life.

It can be no other way.

In the movie, *Silence*, based on a book by Shūsaku Endō, there is a character named Kichijiro. Now the movie is about the persecutions of Christians in Japan in the 1600s. The Christians are threatened with death if they don't step on an image of the Christ. Many Christians don't, and they are sent to violent and tortured deaths.

Kichijiro steps on the image. Not just once but many times over. Sometimes he even spits on it. But he is constantly showing up in the story and asking the priest for forgiveness. Over and over Kichijiro confesses his weakness. And he wishes he could be strong like the others and suffer only one death, instead of the continual deaths that confront him as a weak and cowardly Christian. He is the tax collector in the parable, times ten.

Now at the end of the movie, Kichijiro is taken out and killed by the authorities because he has in his possession a Christian amulet, a Christian trinket.

Kichijiro is ultimately killed, not because he doesn't step on the image of Christ, but because he does. Because, even after he steps on the image, he still believes God's grace is bigger than his sin. And in doing so, he angers the authorities that seek to punish him. In stepping on the image of Christ, the authorities think he is mocking Christ. And they believe that since God is a god of reward and punishment, Kichijiro will run and hide in fear of his God. But Kichijiro believes God's grace is bigger than his sin. And so, every time he steps on the image, it doesn't drive him away from God, but into God's gracious arms. For he is only made more aware of his own weakness.

And so his life mocks the authorities and their understanding of the Divine as a god of reward and punishment. And they cannot be mocked. So when they find him with a Christian amulet, even after he has stepped on the image, they take him out and kill him.

You see, it's one thing to mock God. But it's a whole other thing to mock people's ideas of God, especially those in authority. That can get you crucified and killed.

But this is what Jesus is doing to us in the parable. He is mocking our ideas of who God is. How we think of God as a god of reward and punishment. How we think that God is a god who only loves us when we are good and righteous, or at least hard at work at it. Or that our righteousness counts for something and is something we can trust in.

But if we don't get it from reading a parable, perhaps we will get it from eating a meal.

“In the night in which he was betrayed...” Jesus gave himself to those who were neither righteous nor humble. For Judas and Peter both thought they knew more about who God should be than Jesus.

Nonetheless, Jesus gives himself over to them in his entirety. His body, his blood. His life and his death. Getting himself in proper alignment with them, so that even when they betray and deny him, they were all still properly justified, properly aligned.

They were still in Him and He in them ... through this meal ... they are re-membered.

And so it is with us. We are properly aligned with God through God’s doing.

The justification setting on our lives has been set forever.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Create in Me

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

In the Arms of God

(Tony Alonso, Marty Haugen, Michael Joncas)

Refrain: Come and rest in the arms of God. Leave your worry and fear. Make your home in the heart of God. God will dry every tear. For the burden you carry will fade within God's care.
Come and rest in the arms of God.

1) Gentle is God's way and humble is God's heart. God's love will light the way that leads to peace. Surely you shall see God's goodness and God's grace. Rest now in God's embrace.

Refrain

2) Do not be afraid. God heals the broken heart. Through grief and disbelief God still remains. God and God alone will be your soul's true rest. Fall in the arms of God.

Refrain

3) You are not alone, for God is always near. Come place your doubt and fear within God's care. God will give you rest, and soothe your weary soul. Dwell in the heart of God.

Refrain

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

A Celtic Blessing

(Margaret Rizza)

The guarding of the God of Life be on you, the guarding of loving Christ be on you, the guarding of the Holy Spirit be on you, to aid and uphold you each day and night of your life.
The guarding of God, the guarding of Christ, the guarding of the Spirit be upon you.