

October 27 2013

**Scripture Lessons** ~ Ephesians 2:1-10

Luke 18:9-14

**Sermon**        *Holier Than Thou Hypocrites*

I had a middle-aged couple, several congregations back and this situation stuck me so much in my mind that I had to share it with you in conjunction with this parable that we are going to look at from Luke. This middle-aged couple was both members of a very strict church and the woman of the couple found herself pregnant before marriage. The rules of that congregation specified that under the circumstance they must go before the entire congregation and confess their sin or be kicked out of that congregation.

Of course they were appalled and having family in the local United Church of Christ congregation which was later my church, came and found refuge and acceptance among the people of that church. As the years went by their children were baptized, they were confirmed and the folks were active in the music program and other leadership positions. And they were really an asset to the congregation until something started to change; until something started to change.

Something started to change, unfortunately during my time there. They started to get critical. They started to get critical of this one and that one. They became judgmental and that is not acceptable and that's not acceptable. What I am about to tell you sounds a little bit harsh but bare with me they began to move into a more strict direction. Strict in the same sense in the same direction of the church that they virtually been thrown out of so many, many any years before that time.

And then they started on good old Russ. "You need to tell these people what is right and what is wrong" they said. These people I said. They, as if they had set themselves up as one couple authority on Christian belief and practice and ministry. Now it would have been one thing they if had had these beliefs all along and hadn't so any years ago had accepted that love and that acceptance and that forgiveness of their friends and family at the United Church of Christ. But it was quite another thing to accept all these things and then to turn around and begin to hammer others and hammer them; people who found themselves in similar circumstances to the ones that they had been in so many years ago.

Dare, I say it, that is what is called holier than thou behavior. What I would call being a holier than thou hypocrite. Someone who says one thing and does quite another; Someone who sets themselves up as God personal policemen; someone so convinced of their own righteousness and interpretation of God's law that all

signs of God's love and God's mercy, God's compassion and God's hope and God's joy are gone. Holy than thou hypocrites, a wonderful helpful couple who knew the meaning of love, who knew the meaning of forgiveness but somehow lost it and came up with what I would call a case of spiritual amnesia.

Now Luke relates a similar story of Jesus in today's Gospel lesson that drives home the point of the dangers of this kind of spiritual amnesia. Only the one that has been forgiven the most isn't the one who forgets his need of God's loving grace at all. Instead the one that developed the spiritual amnesia is the religious person; the supposed faithful person and the person in the position to know better than anyone else what God's love and God's forgiveness is all about and the one whose job should be to spread that good news to the whole world. The parable is very simple as you saw when it was read.

There are two characters the first character is Pharisee, a person who is so scrupulous in behavior and so well versed in God's you would accept him to passionately interested in sharing the message designed to attract people to the God of Israel. The message might go something like this. The temple and sacrifices are the reason our God is a loving God. Knowing we are imperfect God has provided a way for us to put our mistakes into the distant past. In that case, we of God's people have all the more reason to please God in the way we live and the way we treat one another in the world. But you know no such luck. No such luck at all instead when the Pharisee prayed. What did he say "God I thank you, not for all my blessings but I am not like other people; those heathens, those rogues, those adulterers or that horrible tax collector over there. You know I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income as an example of holier than thou behavior. As an example of holier than thou hypocrite, I'll let you decide.

The second character is an antithesis, the opposite of the Pharisee. The tax collector of which he speaks as we know from the story, tax collectors were dregs of Israelite society of that today; an unclean Jewish representative of a Roman overlord. Tax collectors not only extracted money out of fellow Jews for the enemy who was Rome; they were also entitled to skim even more off the top for their own personal use. So they were ultimate quisling. They ultimate collaborator and yet how did this ultra sinner pray: head bowed in humility beating his breast in penitence and praying "God be merciful to me a sinner". Well as usual as Jesus set up a situation of irony to make a point but more than to make a point, to turn the tables, to twist the knife and to remind us that God is control of this universe and not any of us. And God makes these things quite differently than any of us can think. What do you suppose Jesus point was in telling this story? What did Jesus hope to teach us as modern day religious people following him on our journey of faith with this passage?

I suppose we can start with Jesus commentary on the par does he say, "I tell you this man, the tax collector, went down to his home justified rather than the other who was the Pharisee, for all who will exalt themselves will be humbled and all who would humble themselves will be exalted. This statement is a total contradiction with conventional wisdom in the world today. I think it was the prophet Micah who summed up faith in God in this thought in this short phrase "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. Walk humble with your God; Love kindness; do justice. It really doesn't sound much like the religious leader in the parable, does it. The Pharisee was so satisfied with his own privileged situation status in God's kingdom that he actually thanked God that he wasn't like those other people; those other people who make mistakes; those other people who don't always measure up. Those people who aren't perfect. Those other people who realize they aren't perfect and ask God for forgiveness. Those other people who then move on to life trying to do things better the next time. In fact people like the like the tax collector and hopefully at our best, people like us. People, I hope who are humble enough to realize we are not perfect. Humble enough to realize other people around us are not perfect either. People who in fact have been forgiven by much by God and who in turn forgive others. It is not easy to be that kind of follower of Jesus. It is not easy at all to love others as God loves us. I think it is a whole lot easier to go through life being holier than thou and in saying how good we are and how wrong everybody is. We say one thing and doing another. It is a lot easier to be a holier than hypocrite in the world today

The family in the United church of Christ, this is one time, this is one time I am going to give you a past So I am going to ask you, please don't take that easy way. Don't that easy way. Don't fall into the trap of being that holier than thou hypocrite.

Together we say AMEN