



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

***“Growing in Spirit and Truth”*** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

October 27, 2019; Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 18:9-14; Excerpt from *Rocks to Roses* by Christine Evangelou

Parables are a challenge. One factor is distance from the original context. This is particularly true of today’s parable. The characters are caricatures, especially the Pharisee. We don’t know much about them apart from their being a sect that strove to be faithful to G-d by being extra faithful to the Torah. They did so to ensure ongoing Judean identity in an antagonistic world. As such they were key to maintaining the community’s spiritual resilience after the destruction of the Second Temple and gave rise to what would become rabbinical Judaism. We’ve not always been careful about this lack of knowledge, forgetting that the portrayal of Pharisees was shaped by Jewish Christians hurt by the fracture between them and other Jews in the late first century. I offer this because by caricaturizing Pharisees out of our ignorance, we have obscured the reaction of those who first heard the parable. They’d have been confused, but for different reasons than we are.

While Christian caricature of Pharisees has made them villains, for those who listened to Jesus it was the tax collector who was rightly seen as far from G-d’s grace. They were collaborators with a conquering empire and profited by doing so. The Pharisee’s prayer would have made sense to those listening to Jesus. Everyone knew Pharisees were holy people, striving to live faithful and religiously pure lives. He wasn’t a thief, cheat or adulterer, all of which the tax collector might have been, especially since one category of tax collectors ran brothels as well as local toll booths. For Jesus to say the tax collector went home justified by G-d would have been a head-scratcher.

And that’s the point. Parables are challenging because they are supposed to challenge the status quo. Jesus cast the tax collector as the hero because he looked at himself with honesty while the Pharisee judged him without any knowledge about him as a person. All he saw was what the tax collector represented. And by scapegoating him for his complicity in the oppression they both experienced, he took an easy way out rather than look carefully at where he was complicit too.

In other words, he didn’t look at his own sin. I say that knowing the word can cause a reaction in more than a few of us. And with good reason. Many of us have come from backgrounds where talk of “sin” was used as a hammer. Within Christianity, church leaders focused on personal sins. In fact, we made much of this in theologizing Jesus’ death. And tending to focus on body issues, we pointed the finger at women as somehow more sinful than men, then turned our attention to racialized peoples, Indigenous peoples and 2SLGBTQ people. We made whole groups of people feel lesser than by making them feel their personal “sins” were quintessentially greater. In the Reform tradition, of which we are a part, we spoke of our “total depravity” as sinners to uplift the gift of G-d’s forgiving grace. The more we beat our breast and said “I am a sinner” the better.

Catholics had a version of this. When I left ministry as a priest, I didn't miss hearing confessions. It's not because I don't think the practice is therapeutic (it is) but because people beat themselves up over the smallest things. Indigenous people were taught to feel this way in large part because they were evangelized by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, an order founded in France when the Catholic version of total depravity teaching was prevalent. As a result, people went to confession a lot, always worried if they were forgiven. Having lived through that, I've downplayed prayers of confession except during penitential times of the year. I know I am not alone. I have plenty of colleagues who, seeing the harm done by too much focus on personal sin and guilt, did the same.

I wonder if we focused on personal sins because we didn't understand the parable. We heard Jesus laud the tax collector for beating his breast and encouraged everyone to do the same. We failed to see how the Pharisee and tax collector were both enmeshed in a system that benefited a few at the expense of many others. By focusing on personal sin, we avoided how enmeshed we were in systemic sin as well, especially avoiding thinking about the ways we benefitted from it.

Case in point, anti-Semitism. The caricaturizing of Pharisees in the gospels fueled it. Rather than see a reminder of inter-religious hurt, leaders used it to condemn a whole people. Restricted from a slew of professions by ecclesial and political leaders, many Jews ended up in commercial fields including moneylending. Scapegoated when times were tough, not just moneylenders but their entire community faced religious persecution. Some rulers used this to their advantage. King Edward I expelled the Jews from England, and conveniently got out of debt. More recent is the conspiracy theory regarding global finance. This well-circulated lie contributed to the Holocaust. More than a few corporations got rich through the heart-breaking extermination of six million people. And that's one example. Racial prejudice was used to justify slavery and colonialism, just as that around gender and sexuality was used to oppress women and demonise the 2SLGBTQ community. Over history people have caricatured others to justify oppressive policies for their benefit. Others benefitted too. I'm sure it wasn't lost on Jesus that the one who looked down on the tax collector benefitted from the commerce of the empire he propped up. His contempt kept him from being more honest.

Personal honesty is key. It's why the tax-collector went home justified. But it isn't easy to face one's own truth. I know I avoid looking at it if I can. Who wants to come face to face with having benefitted from gender inequality, anti-Semitism, slavery, the displacement of Indigenous peoples, the list goes on? But to take a page from the twelve-step movement, admitting one's "sin" is the first step in making up for it. It takes courage, of course. But as Christine Evangelou writes, we all have a brave rebel who can push past limiting beliefs and behaviours. Thankfully the Spirit amplifies the strength of that rebel, enabling us to do the hard work we need to. Christine may have been speaking as a fitness coach, but self-sabotage hinders collective goals, as well as personal ones. Which is why we gather as community to help and encourage one another. Spirit is, of course, at work here as well.

Friends, as I shared with the children, this Thursday is not just Hallowe'en but Reformation Day. A hallmark of the Reform tradition is to be reformed, and always reforming. May we apply this in our lives, willing to confront the ways our actions and attitudes maintain sinful systems. Perhaps as we move forward, we need to be the tax collector from time to time after all. Beating our breast in personal and communal honesty may help us bring about real change. Amen.

