

Sermon “Climbing the Ladder?”
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Kirk of St James
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Philip Yancey is a popular Christian author, and in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace* he describes his childhood. He explains that while growing up his family attended a church that drew sharp lines between law and grace. The church followed a strict set of moral prohibitions, with drinking and smoking at the top of the list. You were not to smoke or drink. Following that movies ranked high on the list of voices, with most people in the church refusing to even watch *The Sound of Music*. Other things like wearing make-up and jewelry, reading the Sunday paper, playing or watching sports on Sunday, mixed swimming, skirt length for girls, hair length for boys, were heeded or not heeded depending on a person's level of spirituality. The better you tended to these areas, the more spiritual you were. He described it as always trying to climb a ladder by stepping on the right rungs.

When I hear Yancey's description I cannot help but be reminded of another man centuries ago, who stood in a temple proud of all he had done (or not done). He was stepping on all the right rungs. In contrast to him stands another man, who does not even have his hand on the ladder yet, a tax collector standing in the back of the temple so ashamed to even lift his head. In Jesus' day there was no question in his listeners minds who the better man was. The Pharisee was doing everything right and even more so. But once again, Jesus meets his listeners with a completely different view of things, the status quo has been reversed. As one author said, "Parables are like fishing lures: they are full of attractive features--feathers, bright colors--and they end with a sharp little barb!"

Last week the Rev. Jeff Murray reminded us of the importance of persistence in faith, and hope. The account we read in Luke today is a story not only about God's grace but also about humanity to often valuing the wrong things in the Kingdom of God. In some ways it is confusing-- the things that the Pharisee were doing were not in and of themselves wrong. In fact, everything he was doing was right--he refrained from sinning and breaking the ten commandments, and he was faithful in his religious duties; his short-comings were the result of

his lofty self-righteousness. The Pharisee went up to the temple and stood to pray near the front in full view of everyone. It is Jewish custom to stand while praying. I visited the wailing wall in Jerusalem once and many people there were not only standing to pray, but also praying out loud, or even crying out to God as loudly as they could. That is not the problem.

The problem in Luke today is that the Pharisee was not there to cry out to God, instead he is there to congratulate himself, and announce to anyone in earshot how pious and wonderful he truly is. "I am so glad I am better than everyone else, I am not like the thieves, the unjust, the adulterers, and I am definitely better than that tax collector praying down at the back." The Pharisee is making sure everyone knows he has not broken any of the commandments. He also mentions that he fasted twice a week. Fasting was to be a sign of humility, of contrition and sorrow. By fasting twice a week, he was doing more than required by law. And the icing on top of the cake? He tithes the money he receives. He does everything that is required and then some. In some ways he is a spiritual superhero.

In stark contrast is the tax collector, who instead of going to the front of the church like the Pharisee, stays near the back. He does not see himself as worthy of being there. In many ways tax collectors lived up to their bad reputations, they stole money from those they taxed and pocketed the money for themselves. They collaborated with the oppressors of their own people; they accepted bribes as a matter of routine. It must have been hard for people to see them grow richer, knowing that it was built on corruption, yet people were subject to the tax collectors. So, when this man comes to the temple his sense of sin was so great that he would not look toward heaven as he prayed. He does not have a laundry list of all the things he does right, he is there to acknowledge his sinfulness and plead for God's mercy in his life. The tax collector understands what grace looks like.

The Pharisee, in all his bragging, has missed the meaning of grace. Jesus told this parable in Luke, to those who were confident of their own righteousness. And it should be noted that anyone can fall into this trap--right after Jesus told this parable the disciples tried to stop children from coming to Jesus, forgetting that they too are important. One of the problems of pride is that it disconnects us from the people around us, and it does so because we begin to view them as "other." It also disconnects us from God.

The Pharisee could not see past himself and his accomplishments and sees his status before God as being a result of his own actions. The danger, as it was for the Pharisee is that we start to worship our own righteousness, we start to focus on ourselves and how good we are, and in doing so fail to see God, and those around us. We forget that Jesus came to save the sinner, the poor, and the downtrodden. The tax collector recognizes his misdeeds and his brokenness, and he comes before God honestly.

After hearing a message like this some may think that God must want us all to go around feeling terrible about ourselves, but that is false as well. Yancey once told a story about an overheard conversation on the bus between a young woman and her neighbour across the aisle. She was reading Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Travelled* and the man across the aisle asked, "what are you reading?" She answered "A book my friend gave me. She said it changed her life." "What's it about?" He asked. "I'm not sure. Some sort of guide to life. I haven't got very far yet." She began to flip through the book. "Here are the chapter titles: Discipline, Love Grace..." The man stopped her. "What's grace?" "I don't know" She replied. "I haven't got to Grace yet." But today my friends we come to grace, grace poured out abundantly for all. Grace like the tax collector experienced. Grace is life changing, life altering, and available to all. When Phillip Yancey talks about grace he turns to the story of *Babette's Feast*.

I will not tell you the whole story, but I do want to share part of it with you today. Based in a tiny, impoverished village on the coast of Denmark called Norre Vosburg, with muddy streets and thatched roof houses there was a group of worshippers in an austere Lutheran sect. They wore all black. Their diet consisted of boiled cod and gruel made from boiling bread with a splash of ale. The Dean had two daughters, Martine was beautiful and caught the eye of a man in the cavalry, but she turned him down--after all who would care for her father, so he left and married someone else. Philippa sang like a nightingale and was offered the chance to become a world-famous opera singer, but she knew that pleasures like this needed to be renounced. 15 years passed, their father died, and the sect began to splinter, but the daughters remained faithful. Suddenly one night there is a knock at the door and a woman fleeing from the civil war in France is on their doorstep. Her husband and son were dead, and she needed a place to stay.

Wary the sisters take in Babette who agreed to do chores in exchange for room and board. Babette fed the poor, helped with Sunday services, and many other things for 12 years. When suddenly one day she received a note telling her that she had won 10 000 francs. And for the first time in 12 years, she makes a request--could she cook the meal for the celebration to honor the 100th anniversary for their father? Over the next few weeks, the village watched in amazement as crates and crates of food are unloaded off ships and taken up to the kitchens. The sect was alarmed and before the meal they made an agreement they would eat the entire meal without comment lest Babette get the wrong idea--tongues are meant for praise, not for exotic tastes. That night the general who had long ago fallen in love with Martine showed up at the meal to escort his aunt. And for course after course of the most amazing meal ever, the village folk sit silently and say nothing, while the general recognizing that he is part of something amazing speaks repeatedly about how incredible the meal is.

I will not give away the ending for you, in case you want to read or watch the story, but I do want to share with you the final speech of the general as he addresses those gathered around the table that night at the end of the meal: "We have been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite...but the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude."

As Philip Yancey said, 12 years before, Babette landed among graceless ones, who heard sermons on grace every week then tried to earn it through all their actions through the week. Then Grace came to them in the form of Babette's feast, a meal of a lifetime lavished on those who in no way earned it, who barely possessed the faculties to receive it. Grace came to Norre Vosburg as it always comes: free of charge, no strings attached, on the house.

The tax collector that day prayed to God understanding grace in a way the Pharisee never could. And that same grace is poured out to us abundantly and in full measure each and every day. What does it mean to live our lives in light of the grace that God has poured out on us, freely, unreservedly, and in full measure?