

Glenview Community Church
Glenview, Illinois

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
23 October 2022

Luke 18:9-14

Marginal Feast

A Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. James M. Matarazzo, Jr.

Text: Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man 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.' (Luke 18:9-14)

I. Jesus and the Pharisees

Luke's Gospel story this morning about the pharisee and the tax collector is straightforward. Most Christians who recall Sunday School have been taught that Pharisees were self-righteous bad people, often criticized by Jesus, and the word Pharisee has often been used by Christians throughout history as a synonym for hypocrite. But this is deeply unfair to the Pharisees, and I am one of those theologians that believe Jesus was a member of the Pharisees, although a radical member.

The Pharisees, in Hebrew *Perushim*, were members of a Jewish social movement founded in 167 BC and dissolved in 73 AD after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. The word *Perushim* means 'separated ones' and may refer to the desire by the Pharisees to keep separate from pagan Gentile customs and remain true to their Jewish faith and its laws. The Pharisees were

reformers. They had a three-fold belief that God was a loving father, who loved humanity so much that he gave us the Torah, the Law, so that everyone who followed the law would have eternal life (fellowship with God, now and forever). In fact the famous passage in John 3:16, For God so loved the world he gave his only Son, echoes the Pharisees – but replaces the Torah with Jesus. The Pharisees strongly believed in the resurrection to eternal life. They also believed that the Torah had a written form and an oral form. The written Torah is the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. The oral law was later called the Talmud. It is a commentary on the written Torah and is deemed to be equally inspired. The Pharisees were the founders of synagogues and their leaders were called *rabbi* – which literally means “my master” – as master was a honorific for teachers. Pharisees emphasized study of the Torah as a form of worship – this they tended to be scholars. They were one of two major factions among Jews under the Roman Empire.

The other faction was the Sadducees or in Hebrew *Shadukim*. They were founded at the same time as the Pharisees in 167 BC and they were also dissolved in 73 AD. Their name in Hebrew literally means “sons of Zadok” – Zadok was the high priest who anointed Solomon king of Israel. Their members were part of the *Kohanim*, the priestly caste, and associated with the Temple and its rituals. They were more powerful than the Pharisees and deemed an aristocratic group. They held sharply different views from the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in fate – no one’s destiny is predetermined. Only God is immortal and free from evil. While humans have free will, they do not have an immortal soul and there is no afterlife. Human death is total and there will be no resurrection. Thus, there is no reward or punishment after death. They also did not believe that there would be a Messiah to deliver the Jesus people nor that anything like the Kingdom of God would be established on earth. The Pharisees did believe in the coming Messiah and the coming kingdom. Since both Sadducees and Pharisees sat on the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews, they were often in conflict with each other. Once the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, the priestly class no longer had a function and thus the Sadducees disappeared.

Not all priests or *Kohanim* were Sadducees – some priests were Pharisees as well. To this day, the *Kohanim* still exist – anyone with the surname Cohen (in Hebrew *Kohen*, which means priest) stems from the priestly lineage in Judaism. The Pharisees did

not disappear, but they ceased using the name *Perushim*. They simply were known as rabbis. Since they were associated with the synagogue and not the temple, they created what we know as Rabbinical Judaism. The Judaism we know today which has no temple, but only the synagogues, exists because of the Pharisees.

The reason Jesus was likely a Pharisee is that he and his disciples are frequently in the synagogues but rarely the temple. Jesus is frequently addressed as Rabbi. The Pharisees at one point warn Jesus about King Herod. Some Pharisees, such as Nicodemus, become disciples of Jesus. And the most famous Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, became Saint Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

One of the reasons Jesus is so harsh in his criticism of the Pharisees is that he was likely criticizing from within. In fact, the Pharisees were aware of the shortcomings of their members. They even had names for less-than-ideal Pharisees such as:

1. The “Shoulder Pharisee,” who wore his good deeds on his shoulder.
2. The “Wait a Little Pharisee,” who always put off doing good deeds until a later time.
3. The “Bruised Pharisee,” who shut his eyes to avoid seeing a woman and was bruised from stumbling and falling.
4. The “Humpbacked Pharisee,” bent double by false humility.
5. The “Ever Reckoning Pharisee,” who was always counting up his good deeds.
6. The “Fearful Pharisee,” always quaking in fear of God’s wrath.

The Pharisees said that the only worthy Pharisee is the “God-loving Pharisee,” who lived with faith and charity, whose deeds matched his professed beliefs. As mentioned, the Pharisees believed that God was a loving father of humanity. It is thus not surprising that if Jesus was a radical member of this group that he would teach his followers to refer to God as Father and to teach them to pray “Our Father who art in heaven...”

What Jesus is criticizing is a bad Pharisee who is proud he is not a sinner, proud of his good deed, proud to be pure and unsullied by the world and proud not to be a wretched tax collector, a Jew employed by the Romans to collect hated taxes. Tax collectors were strongly disliked, far more than we may dislike the IRS – they had a

reputation for greed and exploitation because the Romans allowed them to pocket any amount they got above what they owed the Empire. Yet, Jesus sides with the tax collector and against the Pharisee.

II. Scandalous Company

If Jesus was a Pharisee, he was a radical one. He did things that even the most God-loving Pharisee would avoid. He did not keep separate from the ritually impure; those who did not scrupulously follow the Laws of God. He did not keep separate from women even though Rabbis were not allowed to speak or socialize with women in public unless she was his wife, daughter or blood relative. He did not keep separate from foreigners and pagans – he even healed some of them. He ate and drank with sinners, even tax collectors and prostitutes. In other words, Jesus kept scandalous company and violated the code of behavior expected from a Rabbi. He even said the Kingdom of God belonged to them. For the Sadducees, this was behavior worthy of death. For the Pharisees, many felt that Jesus had crossed a line – but some sided with him.

III. Our Lord's Marginal Feast

Now that we know the history and the context of today's story in Luke, what does it tell us? It tells us that Christianity has a strong connection to the Pharisees and by extension to modern Judaism. But above all it tells us that Jesus who is our rabbi, our teacher, our Messiah, our Lord and Savior, always demands an elasticity toward those in society on the margins. The wedding feast is often used by Jesus as a symbol for the kingdom of God. At this feast, this table of plenty, Jesus invites not the respectable and the wealthy, the beautiful and the famous, the powerful or high born, but the opposite: he invites the meek and lowly, the poor and oppressed, the sick and the weak, the despised – prostitutes and tax collectors; Samaritans, pagans and Romans. It is the Marginal Feast of the Lord – the feast of those on the margins – as long as they are humble. And I am not sure I or many would sit comfortable at the Lord's table of feasting – because there would be people I might dislike, or who might be unwashed and smelly, or badly dressed, or hold political views I find offensive, or have a disease I could catch, or maybe they have committed terrible sins but have been forgiven by Jesus. And yet, this is exactly what Jesus wants of his disciples to sit down and feast with the marginalized – and not just the innocent. Some will indeed be guilty of crimes – maybe terrible things

and still he will tell us to sit down with them. For he has forgiven them and redeemed them and made them new creations. As it is written in John's gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Now, what I won't suggest is how we might do this – to sit down with the 21st century version of a Roman imperial tax collector. But I do know there are so many ways and opportunities to do so in our community and nearby city. Maybe it is simply to sit down and be kind to someone we find offensive or revolting and try to see them through the eyes of Christ. We may fail to do this, maybe often, but there is another opportunity to celebrate our Lord's marginal feast – his fellowship of the rejected whom he loves and commands that we do likewise.