

## **LUKE 18:9-14- NOT KNOWING WHEN THE DAWN WILL COME -OCTOBER 28, 2001**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The other day, waiting on my wife for us to go out to run some errands and do some shopping, I went to the basement club room and turned on the TV and sat on the couch to wait. I channel surfed. (Don't you hate that you channel surf even when you don't want to? But that's a whole other sermon.) I found a movie which, after a few moments viewing, I discovered to be about Martin Luther King and the Montgomery bus boycott. This was a seminal event in the Civil Rights Movement and in American history. Rosa Parks would not give up her seat on a public bus to a white man, and so was arrested under the laws of segregation of the state and the city. The black community was organized and boycotted all bus use until such time as some of the injustices were corrected. People walked to their jobs, and the organization created a car pool to shuttle people to and from their jobs. As soon as this was known, a wave of vandalisms took place in which the tires of cars identified as being owned by blacks were slashed. In a brief clip, a news report type of clip, there were a number of cars parked in a parking area, it might have been a church parking lot, and they were being watched by the black people of Montgomery who slept on the street; people who were enslaved to alcohol, or whose lives were mired in hopelessness. They were recruited to be around the cars at all times during the night and they were, in return, permitted to sleep in the cars should they desire to. One of the men interviewed, with a bottle in his hand, told who ever was behind the camera, "Sometimes everyone has to do their part, you know what I mean?"

### **THE TEXT.**

1. I probably don't need to remind you of the running dispute that seemed to take place between Jesus and the Pharisees, at least in the gospel of Luke. We have already explored the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over the question of healing on the Sabbath. Our text is introduced by Luke as being addressed to some who trusted in themselves as being righteous and who despised others. I guess it is not a surprise that when the story unfolds, it is a Pharisee who is the figure representing those named in the introduction. Gunther Bornkamm in his book on Jesus remarks that in many places in the synoptic gospels the Pharisees are disclosed to be not only self righteous, proud of themselves, their place in the community, what they have achieved, but that they are a gloomy lot, given to complaining about others, grumbling always about what Jesus might be doing or that the people responded to him.

But given that part of their makeup, we need to make another observation. The Pharisees represent a group of people that every community needs if it is going to hang together, if it is going to not fall into chaos. In the rhetoric of public officials to try to call Americans to not take out their anger and confusion on Arab or Muslim Americans, they are routinely called "law abiding, contributing American citizens". A culture, a social order

is carried along and keeps its order, on the backs of those who make it their business to embody in their lives the law, rules and mores of the culture. Certainly, we can see that the Jewish community under oppressive and corrosive rule of Rome, needed its “law abiding, contributing citizens, like the Pharisees to continue.

2. Now we turn to the tax collector. I don’t know how much you know about this kind of person in the New Testament era. The larger context was that the Jews, who had lived in Palestine since the Exodus, meaning almost time immemorial, were once again, under the heel of a foreign power. The signs of the Roman power were in evidence in the land of the Jews, as it was everywhere the Romans extended their power. This rule provided some security for the Jews, but it also robbed them of autonomy and self rule. The Roman rule was felt in the imposition of taxes. There were poll taxes, and property taxes. Then there were also custom taxes. When goods were moved from one district to another, a tax had to be paid. Roman officials were appointed to collect the poll tax and the property tax. The customs tax collection was sold to bidders. Most of those who bid on the collection of taxes were Roman, but those who actually collected the taxes from the populace were Jews. These Jews who collected the taxes from their fellow Jews had to extort extra money from their countrymen in order to make a living. So they collected a tax to be returned to their bosses, then collected extra to make a living. We know from a text coming up in chapter 19 about Zacchaeus, that such collectors could make a little money. But the tax collectors, were considered collaborators. They were people who had given up their place in the community in order to make money. They were not able to hold office, they could not benefit from the specific benefits of being a Jew, only the benefits from being under Roman rule. They were considered people who had given up their Jewish identity and become Gentiles. They were lumped, as we know from other texts, with robbers, prostitutes and sinners. Referring back to what was said about Pharisees, tax collectors were those who worked to undermine Jewish identity and continuity under foreign rule.

One took a prominent place and prayed a prayer like one reported in the Talmud. A prayer written to be prayed, about thanking God that the person praying, a man, thanked God that he was not like others who engaged in idol life, that he was not a slave, that he was not a Gentile, that he was not a woman.

The other man took a place far off, and did not lift his eyes, or raise his hands. But instead he lowed his eyes and smote his breast, smote his heart and plead for mercy for his life.

## **11. IS THE PARABLE ABOUT US OR GOD?**

1. How does the voice of Jesus seek us out? I don’t think that is an easy question. I know it is not an easy answer. In order for his voice to seek us out it must come to us through a thick cloud created by the passing of time and the changing of the world. The voice of Jesus must be delivered to us by human hands and every time the voice of Jesus is touched by human hands it is covered over with the concerns, passions, issues and textures of the humans that touch it. At times, it has been proposed that the passage of the

voice of Jesus through time has so altered it that it is muffled and unclear. At other times, like our own, it is thought that by use of certain tools of human creation, it is possible to penetrate the what has accrued to the voice of Jesus and be confronted by Him. This is not to say that that must always be necessary. Sometimes we are confronted by God in what humans have spoken as a result of hearing the voice of Jesus. T.S. Eliot, was captivated by the liturgy and history of the Church of England and returned by that means to Christianity. Some of the Victorian intellectuals, so challenged and drawn to the ideas of Darwin, found their way back to the church on the basis of the character of the rich culture the church created. But sometimes it is the voice of Jesus which speaks to the heart. We know that when the voice of Jesus speaks, it always speaks to the heart and it speaks to the heart about God.

2. In the story, we see a Pharisee, a good man who was the back bone of the Jewish culture in an oppressed time. We see a tax collector, who recognizes what his life is and what it has wrought and is helpless and hopeless before himself and what he has wrought.

Jesus says, at the end of the story, that the tax collector went down to his house justified. We know that Jesus made it his business to associate with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners of all kinds. The writer of the article on this text in the Interpreters Commentary suggests that he knows why Jesus associated with them. He did so so that he could convert them to another way of life. I am not at all sure about that. Certainly there are occasions when Jesus invites people like this with whom he deals to make new decisions about their lives. But are we to presume that he associates with them to make them like the Pharisee who is the other character in this story. After all, in terms of behavior, the Pharisee is a good person. He engages in behavior that is within the confines of the law. He goes beyond the law in terms of self discipline. He fasts twice a week. The law provides only one day a year for fasting. He tithes on all he has. Some of the commentators that I read suggest that this is tithing on possessions beyond what the normal rule of tithing applied to. He might be a little proud of himself, but if Jesus associates with tax collectors and sinners for the purpose of converting them, what other option is there beside the model of good people? But if it is the tax collector who goes to his house justified, what are we to conclude?

### **111. THE DAWN COMES.**

I am reading again The Sweet Hereafter by Russell Banks. I have been going to the Cultural Studies class of my friend Peter Baker in the English Department of Towson University to give a presentation on this novel for several semesters now. It is a short novel of the after affects of a school bus accident and the death of 14 children of the town of Sam Dent, New York. The story is told through four characters affected. One of the characters is Billy Ansel, Vietnam veteran, widower of a much loved wife who died of cancer four years earlier and now father of twins killed in the accident. Billy Ansel stands present to his loss in the most disturbing and searing of ways. He will not accept that his loss can be dealt with by blaming someone and filing a suit to be compensated for the

loss. He does not believe in what some people say about knowing in advance that something like this was going to happen to Sam Dent. Most challenging of all for me is his explicit declaration that he does not accept the Christian answer; that it was God's will, or that God wanted the children in his presence, or that there is life beyond biology, that there is life above the earth and after the earth in terms of heaven and hell and that therefore there really is no death. This he calls denial. He will not deny what he experiences. He will not turn his back on his loss. His loss is what he is. He turns to his wife and his children, all dead, as his companions and turns, it seems, away from the living. To read his narration is to hardly be able to continue.

I don't know why I thought about this when I read and thought about this parable. But there is something similar about the tax collector and Billy. Billy has lost everything that mattered to him, that made his life his life. He refuses to move on. He will, instead stay with those who have made up his life even though they are dead. The tax collector has seen his life with the same clarity of Billy. It is implied in the story that he has accepted his banishment from his people; he has accepted his fraudulent behavior; he has accepted that his whole life has been undermined by what he has done; he recognizes what is required to undo what he has done and it almost seems that undoing it is beyond his ability to imagine or do. His life is undone. Billy's life is undone. Does he believe that anybody hears him. I don't think so. I am not sure about Billy. But in both cases, if there is One who hears, One who is present to the deepest secrets at the heart of life, the tax collector and Billy will not withhold anything.

Billy stops speaking. The tax collector goes down from the temple to his life. Does he hear what Jesus says? Who can say? Does he mend his life? Who can say? Has God moved in the silence of the temple, in the heart torn asunder?: We don't know. Maybe. But what if not? Tell me. What if not?

What we know is nothing more about the tax collector. What we know about is what Jesus decides to tell us about God with respect to the tax collector. God is moved by this sundered heart and life. The gap between God and sinner is overcome by the movement of God and we have this word.

## CONCLUSION

Most of the time, I think, we are like the Pharisee. And that is OK. It is OK to try to do right, to be a good and law abiding citizen, to do your duty, to be, as Wilbur Larch told Homer Wells in Cedar House Rules, of use. And sometimes I think it is OK to take pride in being and doing such. But there are times when we are like the tax collector and Billy Ansel. There are times when we must stand apart and be confronted with what we have made of our lives, when all that we took pride in is ashes slipping through our fingers. When we are by grace, it seems, allowed to see what we have wrought by our living through the world and time, and that we have thrown off chaos and harm and hurt in the lives of others and we strike our hearts and can only say to what ever is outside us, "have mercy" and Jesus tells us, despite it all; despite the barrenness of our hearts and the

cluttered leavings of our lives, the sense that we dwell with death, that we are justified by the God of all.

We hope to hear the voice of Jesus so that we know this before we leave the set aside place, the solitary place, and go back down to our lives.

Amen