

Sermon: Hope and Restoration?

I had another sermon in mind earlier this week, focused more on our reading from Joel. It was called Hope and Restoration and would have matched up quite well with Reformation Sunday, which we're acknowledging a little bit earlier than is customary this year. I had this other sermon in mind, and then life happened. Global issues have me feeling heavy this week. I wanted to talk about hope and restoration, and I just couldn't get there.

So Friday evening, as I sat staring at the blank page willing the Spirit to move, I felt rather demoralized. This is not a good headspace to be in when you're trying to write a sermon about hope, let me tell you. So I began thinking about what a therapist once told me about the 3 things we can do when we feel upset or worried:

- First, if we're down about something we can change, we can go into problem solving mode. But there's nothing I can do right now to change global geopolitics, so that option is off the table.
- The second thing we can do when we're upset is accept the situation and sit with it. Sometimes, we just must feel what we're feeling. That would have been fine if I had time to sit around and be bummed out. But I didn't want to sit around and be bummed out, so that option went out the window.
- The third thing we can do when we're feeling down is to, like option 2, accept the situation but to then shift our focus intentionally to something else. That something else can be something that simply occupies our minds or bodies, but I have found that it's easiest for me to shift gears if that shift is directed toward something that brings me joy.

Okay, what brings me joy? Book stores. Book stores are my happy place. Bookstores allow me to grab a book and a cup of English Breakfast tea and sit down to read. Whenever I'm in England, Donna and I like to walk up to the mall to sit and read together in the bookstore called Waterstones. One of the places the kids and I go as a treat is to Barnes and Noble. Bookstores are calming to me. I go there when I feel

overwhelmed, when I must get work done, or even just when I just want to get out for a bit.

About 15 years ago, I was perusing the racks at Barnes and Noble when I came across a book I hadn't seen before. The cover showed a sad portrait of a woman, eyes cast down, with a dark background. It also happened to have the Oprah's Book Club sticker on it. I've never been a big Oprah's Book Club fan, so I knew to steer clear of it. I didn't take note of the title, just the haunting face of the woman and the sticker and thought to myself, "This it not for me." Over the next several months, I would see this book nearly every time I was in the bookstore. It got to the point that I was super annoyed when I would see it. Finally, I saw it on a clearance rack and picked it up. What is this book about? Why do I keep running into it? I read the synopsis on the inside cover. The book was about a woman whose family had been taken as political prisoners in Morocco when she was growing up. It was a true story of trials and triumphs, brokenness and ultimately of rebirth. To this day, that book, *Stolen* by Malika Oufkir, is one of my favorite books.

I learned from that experience never to judge a book solely by its cover or by its celebrity book club affiliation. As I reflect on that experience, it got me thinking about how often humans make assumptions based on how things appear. This is not exclusive to books and their covers but seems to extend far beyond that. Most commonly, I think, with people's visible characteristics. We make quick assumptions about people we know nothing about all the time based on their looks, where they're from, who they're married to, their age, and sometimes even based on their occupations.

Who among us has not looked at a person and dismissed them because they do not seem the right sort of person? As a woman in ministry, I can tell you that I've experienced the dismissiveness because I do not "look" like a minister. Add to that my marriage to a woman and you've got a recipe for being dismissed easily by plenty of people across the Christian world.

The judgements we make about people matter; they have consequences. Snap judgements determine everything from which people we deem worthy of help to who we will vote for to who we invite into conversation. We all do this, whether we care to admit it or not.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus gives us a story with characters about which he knows we will do this very thing. Jesus tells us a parable about a Pharisee and a tax-collector. This is an interesting parable because it subverts our expectations, but also ensnares us in a bit of a trap. Let me explain. Let's look first at the Pharisee. Now Pharisees were religious folks in Jesus's time who were particularly observant of Jewish law. They were righteous and, in the stories we hear throughout the gospels, we are given to understand that they like people to know how right and righteous they are and, sometimes, they're hypocrites.

Now let's turn to the tax-collector. Tax collectors were reviled in society then as agents of the empire, complicit in the injustice being unleashed in Israel. And it wasn't just that they worked with the empire, but that they often did this in underhanded ways. They are thought to be greedy, money-grubbing guys. That's why Zacchaeus, who we talked about not that long ago, points out his honesty in his financial dealings. He's an anomaly. He didn't want to be thought as one of *those* tax collectors.

So here we have Jesus comparing a religious man in service of God and a secular man in service of Empire. But there's another layer here we must consider. This isn't the first time Jesus uses a Pharisee or dealings with one to make a point. Hearers of Jesus's parable would have known that, while the Pharisee is super religious, he's also known to be quite self-righteous and not always the hero of the story. So right there, the audience then as now is alerted that Jesus is preparing to disrupt our expectations.

This parable gives us two men. The first, pious and self-righteous, goes to the temple and boldly stands before God, lifting his *own* holiness. He offers prayers of thanks, but

only thanks for his superiority to “those people,” the thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even the lowly tax-collector. We can see clearly that this is not how we are supposed to pray to God, right? As I said in my Faithful Five devotional this week: The Pharisee comes to prayer with an agenda that is self-centered and, therefore, closed. He is not in conversation *with* God, he is talking *at* God. Whether the Pharisee is more righteous than the tax collector is not really the central point. The Pharisee doesn't enter prayer hoping to grow closer to God or be changed in that relationship, he is *telling* God he's already got it all figured out.” This, we know, isn't how we're to come into conversation with our Creator.

We know this Pharisee is not the good guy here. Instead, it's the tax-collector, he who is aware of his failings, who comes before God in abject humility, that Jesus praises. His prayer is lifted as an example precisely because he acknowledges and asks for forgiveness for those places in his life he has faltered. He knows he does not deserve God's love and forgiveness and so he offers prayers of contrition. Humility is the point.

Our call to humility is not a new concept for Christians, and yet it's one of which we must constantly be reminded. In scripture, we're told this time and again. In Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Proverbs 3:34 “He mocks proud mockers, but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.” Proverbs 11:2 “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.”

Then again in Proverbs 12:15, 15:32, 18:12, 22:4, 27:2.

In Psalm 25:9 “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” And again Psalm 149:4, 2 Chronicles 7:14 “If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways then I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” And in the New

Testament, humility is everywhere: Here in Luke, in Romans 12:32, 1 Cor. 12:9-10, Philippians, Matthew, James, 1 Peter—and on and on.

We are called to humility. Okay, Pastor Jessica, we get it. Be humble. Amen, sermon over, let's move on, right?

Not so fast, my friends. Remember how I said the parable subverts our expectations, but also “ensnares us in a bit of a trap?” We talked about the subversion. So what's the trap, you ask? Well, Jesus closes this parable this way, “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.” So as we listen to this parable, we have a choice of whom to relate to. Most of us probably relate to the tax-collector, right? We know we have “fallen short of the glory of God.” We make prayers of confession! We admit our failings! We're humble! We got this! We're not the Pharisee! We're not the one who will be humbled, but the ones who have already humbled ourselves. So, we're going to be exulted!

Do you see the problem? If we believe we are the one who will be exulted, then we aren't truly humble are we? Not really. Because here we are lifting up our humility as a trophy. If we're celebrating how humble we are, we're missing the point. If we're acting humble in order to be superior to the not-so-humble, then we're caught in what the Salt Project calls, “the humility trap.” The more we try to be humble for humility's sake, to be humble in the way God approves of, the more ensnared we become in this trap. How can we be truly humble if the reason we're being humble is to be exulted?

Well, maybe we can't. I think this is one of those things we can't ever get 100% right unless we put away our need to be lauded for how hard we work to live into the way of Jesus. So if we can't get it right, how do we get exulted? How do we earn God's love and favor? I think one of the points of this parable is to teach us that there's nothing we can do individually to earn our place with God, but that God has given God's grace freely and unreservedly to all. God's not withholding grace or love from anyone based

on their degree of righteousness or humility or goodness or ability. Salvation isn't determined by us, but by God. Our job isn't to point fingers or gate keep at the doors of heaven, but to work here and now to make the world closer to the way Jesus dreamed and prayed we could be.

So we should put away our pointer fingers when directed toward others and worry more about what we're doing. Worry about how closely we're living into the gospel imprint. That's one lesson of this parable.

And there's one more thing I want to mention. The Pharisee is praying in a way that tells God that he's pretty perfect, right? He's better than all of these people. He's so good that he's like God. And so the danger Jesus is warning against is also self-exultation to the level of God. Jesus doesn't want us to put ourselves on par with God. That's what Adam and Eve attempted to do. The Pharisee was basically saying he was as perfect as God is perfect and *that's* what Jesus warns us against here. Jesus didn't say that if you're good at something, you shouldn't acknowledge that. If you're good at something, you should thank God for that gift and own it, all the while keeping in mind that you are human. You are fallible. None of us is God and, at the same time, none of us is worthless. We are the beloveds of God! Remember that in all your failures and successes, your downs and your ups, your worst times and best times, you are one of the beloveds of God. You were created for a reason—not to simply exist, but to live. Not just to survive, but to thrive, all with God by your side as you strive together for the coming of that glorious kingdom. I guess maybe this sermon is about hope and restoration after all.

Go out and do the justice you are called to! Show the mercy and kindness God wishes for us all to show! Like Pastor Jessica in the bookstore, go and find your joy! Live joyfully, walk with God humbly *and*, at the same time, shout with thanksgiving to the One who created you. You were made in the image of the same God who chose to be revealed in the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. You may sometimes get it wrong, but if you keep trying, you will eventually get it right.

And that's the good news! Amen.