

“No Villain, No Hero” – Luke 18:9-14 – Oct 28/07

I have to tell you, the past few days have been awfully busy, cleaning out sister Sue’s apartment, several family gatherings, and a large memorial service yesterday afternoon. It has been great however to see so many old friends and relatives, reconnecting with nieces and nephews and friends I haven’t seen for years, and with lots of laughing as we reminisce about old times.

It was just such memories of going to movies a long time ago that came to mind as I looked at our text from Luke’s gospel, especially memories of old black and white Westerns (yes, children – long before there was digital, the images were recorded in an analog form on film ... and before there was 24-bit colour depth it was all done in shades of grey!) Those Westerns were rather simplistic pieces of drama in which the bad guys wreaked havoc on the citizens until the good guys showed up and won the day. In today’s rather complex day and age it is easy to become somewhat nostalgic, because in those movies it was really easy to tell the good guys from the bad ... the bad guys wore black hats and the good guys wore white hats. When the good guys came riding over the hill or around the bend the whole theatre would cheer – yay, the good guys!

Well, here we go again, cheering the good guy! That’s the most common misunderstanding of this parable – booing the Pharisee, cheering on the tax collector. Almost everyone who hears or reads this story sees the Pharisee – who prays “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.” – as the “black hat” or the bad guy. Likewise, the tax collector – who prays “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” – is seen as the “white hat” or the good guy.

It’s easy to do that – to be lured into seeing these two in black and white terms as the bad guy and the good guy. The text itself draws you into that overly simplistic view with the typical Lucan introduction that sets the stage for a misinterpretation. Likewise the concluding verse confirms the view in the introduction, and so you are both led by the hand into your misunderstanding and affirmed on the way out the door.

I give you this word of caution – whenever you look at a parable in the gospels, never, ever be content with blindly accepting what appears to be the “obvious” meaning of the parable. Always look a little deeper, always stop and think for a moment, always check to see if there isn’t a different and more significant meaning lurking just below the surface of the sheen of obvious.

Take today’s parable, for example. The obvious first-glance message is that the Pharisee is the bad guy and the tax collector is the good guy and both get their just rewards. But pause and recognize for a moment that the Pharisee is not a villain – he represents complete dedication to observing the law of Moses. Remember, this parable was spoken into a Jewish world – the Pharisee was devotedly following to the letter everything he had been taught in faith. In fact, his recitation of his stellar performance is that of a person exceeding the law’s demands. His prayer is a common expression of thanksgiving used by rabbis prefaced by the claim of the psalmist with respect to personal behaviour (Ps. 17:3-5 ... If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.) We do the same thing – we responsively echo the words of the psalmist to express our devotion to God as we approach him in worship. The Pharisee would have – and properly so – been seen by those listening to Jesus as the “white hat” – the good guy.

In the same way, the tax collector is not a hero. In fact, as a tax collector working for Rome collecting taxes from his own people, he is a reprehensible character, religiously unclean and politically a traitor. This is no casual non-church-attender. This is someone who deliberately uses his position to extort money from others – and the weaker the others the greater the extortion. He is hated,

loathed, his every action is a complete denial of justice and mercy. Although his prayer is according to Psalm 51 (a wondrous example of religious chest-beating attributed to David after the Prophet Nathan had come to visit him after David's little dalliance with the charming Bathsheba) even so, the tax collector's life is offensive. He would clearly have been identified by Jesus' audience as the "black hat" – the bad guy.

That it's the other way around – that the Pharisee is the good guy and the tax collector is the bad guy needs to catch our attention. Missing the point that the Pharisee is the good guy and the tax collector is the bad guy robs the parable of its radical message of grace. Sadly that's what happens all too often as the story gets told and retold. Too quickly people jump to the concluding verse, and so too often the Pharisee is seen as a hollow hypocrite while at the same time the tax collector is seen as "generous Joe the bartender" or "honest Abe the atheist" – you know, they don't go to church but they're nice guys otherwise. Both Joe and Abe are admired in today's society for their rejection of organized religion – after all, who'd want to associate with those hypocrites? But that admiration is to miss the real point that God justifies sinners who confess their inability to rise above their sinfulness on their own and who throw themselves upon the mercy of God and rely on God's grace. The heart of this parable emphasises the difference between those who rely upon themselves, and those who trust in God.

What's perhaps even sadder is the damage that has been done to the church by people of faith who have misunderstood this parable. Or is it the damage done to the faith by people of the church who have misunderstood this parable? Either way, the sentiment "thank God I am not like those Pharisees" has been perhaps the most common misrepresentation of this parable, a sentiment all too easily latched on to by those who readily extend it to "thank God I am not like those Christians." How many times have you heard that kind of sentiment used as an excuse for not practicing any kind of faith? How many times have you used it yourself?

We need to recapture the real meaning of this parable, and proclaim it faithfully. It is about the radical, unusual, upside-down-inside-out grace of God. It is about not only the possibility but the reality of reconciliation with God of all of us who are sinners through repentance and prayer. It is about the wondrous gift from God of justification – being made right with God – through faith in Christ Jesus. It is about trusting in God, not in ourselves – and how opposite is that of the usual misuse of this parable?!

We have a huge task ahead of us, convincing the world outside our doors that we are not a collection of Pharisees thanking God we are not like those sinners. The most profound way to approach that task is to check and make sure that we aren't a collection of Pharisees thanking God we are not like those sinners. That's not as easy a task as it sounds, because it is all too easy to be thankful we're not like those who are homeless, addicted, or otherwise trapped by their own personal demons. It is difficult to remember – and to live out – that we are one with them, and but for the grace of God (and not our own doing) we would be just like them. We need to be able to hear them say "I thank God I am not like them" – meaning us – and help them to hear that by the grace of God we may indeed truly be one with each other. We need to drop the use of the word "them" and replace it with "us." That is not as easy as it sounds – but by the grace of God it is not only possible but the task to which we are called in our faith.

Unnerving isn't it? Unsettling, isn't it, to have our faith challenged, to have what we thought we knew so clearly brought into question? Yes, it is – but that is the true nature of the gospel message of the radical grace of God incarnated in Christ Jesus our Lord. By the grace of God, we sinners and Pharisees alike are justified by that grace – not by our own doing – and can now live our lives to his glory.