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By Brec Seaton

Introduction

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector comes almost at the end of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem – a journey that is covered through many chapters in this Gospel. Focusing on a righteous man who showed contempt to others, the parable draws on the importance of seeking forgiveness and the role that others can play in this. The parable comes just before Jesus foretells of his death and resurrection for the third time.

Text

Luke 18: 9–14

He 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.”

Comment

Two conversations with God that couldn't be more different. One from a man of position in society – a religious leader with status and power. The other a man who made a living collecting taxes for the Roman rulers – a man loathed by many. The first man gave himself a pat on the back – congratulating himself before God that he wasn't a thief, rogue, adulterer, or even 'like this tax collector'. He judged others as he prayed to God, for he was a 'good' man who upheld religious law, rites and ceremonies.

The second man, most likely dishonest, knew he was a sinner – he knew that his life was not good in the eyes of God and was remorseful. It is this man, the lowest of the two, who is able to take a look at himself, reflect on who he is, the impact of his life on others, and come to God in repentance. The religious leader does not even consider that he might need to repent – so full of praise and admiration is he for his

own life style of keeping the rules and observing religious ceremonies. He sees no conflict within his own life – he is living as God requests, fulfilling his duties.

But what makes this religious leader only look at the surface of his life, and what makes the tax collector go deeper – able to feel remorse, guilt and then to move from these emotions towards God – towards the one that will forgive.

Before being able to ask for forgiveness, there is a need to recognise that not all in life is wholesome. This involves moving inwards towards our self – towards the tension that has built in our life – the tension that we feel when we know something is not right – the tension that says ‘I messed that one up’. And even when our actions are with the best of intentions, sometimes the outcome is one that affects another in a way that was unforeseen and hurtful or even damaging.

The word ‘sorry’ is reported to be the hardest word to say. Two children have a falling out and are asked to say sorry to the other – and yet they find this incredibly difficult. They may refuse to say sorry for a long time, or the words come out of the mouth so quickly that they are possibly not at all genuine – like saying sorry with your fingers crossed!

Seeking forgiveness it is not easy. It is a process – and sometimes the depth of hurt, or anger, or the fear of what will happen when we admit we were not acting in the most appropriate way, or pride – get in the way of this process. Those that live in this place of being unable to journey towards forgiveness need holding firmly and gently by others – to be held in the love of God until such a time that the things that stop us seeking forgiveness are unblocked and we can enter the process of self-reflection and letting go of the past.

Tragically the religious leader is judgemental about another who is in deep pain – who is beating his chest. Rather than holding this man in the love of God, he stands alone. Rather than journeying with this man towards reconciliation, he stands apart. This was an opportunity for wrongs to be righted, for relationships to be healed, for a new understanding to be gained. And yet the religious man did nothing. He did not see that his judgmental attitude was hurting and holding back another.

‘There are two utterly different forms of religion: one believes that God will love me if I can change; the other believes that God loves me so I can change’ * The religious leader is living in the first model of religion, the tax collector in the second.

By his contempt of those who do not uphold the religious laws and by his judgemental attitude, the religious leader is blocking the pathway to forgiveness. He is making it difficult for those who would come to the temple to pray. He is not holding them in the love of God. Yet to love is to become vulnerable, and so in the process of holding others, he would need to become vulnerable – and this he cannot do.

To forgive and to be forgiven is to seek reconciliation. Reconciliation with God, reconciliation with another, reconciliation with ourselves, reconciliation with creation. ‘Forgiveness is power. It frees us from our past, overcoming every evil. It can heal both the person forgiving and person forgiven. In fact, it could change the world if we would only allow it to flow through us unchecked. But how often do we stand in its way, not daring to unleash its force!’ **

*R.Rohr

** J Arnold in the Lost Art of Forgiving

Response

At the heart of reconciliation is the move towards hearing and understanding another. This week challenge yourself not to judge another, but to engage in listening to truly understand and hold another in their journey.

Carry a small pebble, or similar object in your pocket this week. Every time you touch the pebble, ask yourself this questions: 'Who have I judged in the last 12 hours?' As you go about your day, hold these people in prayer, in the love of God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
I cannot put into words
the depth of feeling
the extent of love
the breadth of Your mercy, grace, forgiveness and love
which You bring to my life!

Today,
I give as much of myself to You as I'm able –
my brokenness and my wholeness
my hopefulness and my fears
my love and my passion.

Jesus,
I want nothing more than to walk with You
every step of the way
every moment of today
in all I think, and do and say.

Thank You for
Your healing
Your grace
Your mercy
Your kindness
Your love
Your patience
Your peace.

AMEN.

(prayer by Rev Phil Gough)

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills