

“The Rich Man and The Poor Man”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
October 23rd, 2016
23rd Sun./Pentecost/

2 Timothy 4:1-8,16-18

Luke 18:9-14

[The tax collector], standing far off,
would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying,
‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’

Luke 18:13

Let us pray... O God,
Thank you for your grace – the help we have received along the way
that has brought us this far.
Thank you for the help we shall surely get as we continue our journey
together with you.

Amen

Today’s Gospel lesson is another example of the Jesus Prayer –

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

In this parable, Jesus contrasted a Pharisee

who was a law-abiding, but self-righteous person,

in comparison with a rich tax collector who was remorseful.

Though tax collectors were despised by their Jewish peers as Roman collaborators,

Jesus commended this person for his humility –

and therefore ‘rich’ in regard to his relationship with God.

Though wealth especially significant in this Gospel story,

it reminds me of a story I first heard from Richard Humphreys

called “*The Rich Man and The Poor Man*”...

There was a Rich Man who lived in a mansion on top of a hill.

Every day in the late afternoon, he would take his tea in the garden.

And every day about that time, he would hear

the sounds of singing, laughing, and dancing

coming from the Poor Man’s house at the bottom of the hill

who lived there with his wife and eight children.

This distracted the Rich Man to no end,

but that day he decided to do something about it!

So, the next morning the Rich Man arranged to have the Poor Man fired from his job.

And that afternoon, there were no sounds of singing, laughing, and dancing –

only the sound of children crying.

Meanwhile at the Poor Man’s home, the Poor Man comforted his family saying,

“There, there, my little ones! Don’t be distressed!

Your mother & I will dig up the 30 doubloons

buried in the backyard for just such an occasion!

Willard, p.2

I'll go to market, buy some seeds, and by the next harvest
we will have vegetables and grain to sell!

In the meantime, our family & friends,
whom we helped generously in the past, will help us, now!"

So, early the next day, having dug up their savings, he went off to market.

By day's end, he was coming home with a great wooden bowl filled with seeds
and with a lanyard looped around his neck to help carry it all.

As he caught up to a neighbor walking the same direction,
he tipped his hat, but stumbled – sending all the seeds flying up into the air
and falling down between the rocks of the cobblestone road!

Horrified at his terrible misfortune, the Poor Man asked his neighbor
to tell his wife what happened and that he was going to sign up
to be a sailor for a ship sailing that evening,
and he would send money home as soon as he could!

He couldn't swim, so he was sent to keep watch in the crow's nest,
but that night as they were underway, a fierce storm at sea came up.
The ship was tossed to and fro', back and forth, back and forth,
until he was thrown out into the sea!

The Poor Man would certainly have drowned if he hadn't still
carrying that wooden bowl on a lanyard around his neck –
which floated up before him for him to grab onto and live!

He awoke the next day on the beautiful white sandy beach of a tropical island,
and no sooner did he wonder if anyone lived on this island,
when a dozen scary looking warriors stepped out of the jungle!
They were dressed in bamboo armor studded with shark's teeth,
and walrus tusks stuck through their noses and had swordfish spears.
They were mean-looking and ugly and had tattoos all over them.

Then the meanest and ugliest of them all stepped forward and said,
"I'm the King of this Island and we don't allow no visitors,
excepting those what give me a present I likes!"

Thinking fast, the Poor Man said,

"Well, Your Honor, let me present you with –
my hat!" as he put the wooden bowl on his head
and pulled up the lanyard, tight under his chin.

"It'll protect you from the rain and shade you from the sun
and it floats, which is how I came to be on your island.

It is the most precious possession I own," he said
as he undid the lanyard and lay the wooden bowl
gingerly at the feet of the King.

Willard, p.3

The King picked it up and put it on – which fit perfectly around all the walrus tusks and shark's teeth and a big smile came across his face. He said,
“I like it! Now for dinner!”

The Poor Man wasn't sure if this meant he was to be the guest of honor – or the main course, but it turned out to be a luau.

After the limbo competition and before the hula dancing, the King leaned over to the Poor Man and said,
“You know, we got us another rule on this island.

If I get a present I really, really, really like, then I have to match it”.

Then he handed the Poor Man a package made of a folded palm leaf.

When he opened it, he found three jewels of inestimable value –
a Ruby, an Emerald, and a Pearl –
making the Poor Man now a Very, Very, Very Rich Man!

The next day, the King put the Poor Man, now a Very, Very, Very Rich Man, onto the royal outrigger canoe with his best rowers and sent him back to the Mainland...

Meanwhile, it was about time for tea as the Rich Man sat down to admire his garden and the view below, when suddenly –
he heard singing...laughing...and dancing!

It was coming from the Poor Man's house, and the Rich Man was beside himself!
He decided he would handle this situation himself!

The Rich Man knocked on the door of the Poor Man who was now a Very, Very, Very Rich Man, and said, just as nicely as he could,
“Oh neighbor! I heard that you had fallen on hard times
and I thought I would stop by to see how you were doing!”

And the Poor Man, who was now a Very, Very, Very Rich Man, said,
“Oh thank you, but when I lost my job, I went to the market
with our family savings and bought a bowl of seeds
which I spilled on the way home.

I had to sign on with the crew of a ship,
but I was thrown overboard in a storm and washed up on an island
where they have this rule that they don't allow no visitors
except they give their king a present he really likes.

And if he really, really, really likes it, then they got another rule
where he has to match it.

And the king liked my gift so much he gave me
a Ruby, an Emerald, and a Pearl of inestimable value!

So, would you like to come in for tea?”

Hearing this, the Rich Man immediately
began to make plans in his head for a trip to that island!

Certainly he could come up with a present
better than any this Poor Man could have possibly offered.

Willard, p.4

So the Rich Man bid a hasty goodbye and went home to make plans...

Early the next morning, the Rich Man set sail with a merchant ship
loaded with gourmet foods, presents, and rare oddities
and by noon, they arrived in the bay of that tropical Island.

It took several hours to unload the ship, to get the fires going,
and set up a feast for everyone on the island
that included whole roasted turkeys, chateau-briand steak,
lobster bisque, greenbeans amandine, and cocoanut crème pie for desert!

The King of the island was amazed and said to the Rich Man,
“This is the second time in a week that a stranger has come to our Island,
even though we have rules against uninvited visitors –
except they give me a gift I really like.”

The Rich Man said with anticipation,

“Yes, I know!”

Then, the King said,

“And we have another rule that says if I get a gift that I really, really, really like,
I have to match it!

Well, you have utterly outdone my wildest expectations!”

The Rich Man said,

“Yes? Yes?”

And the King said,

“I have no choice but to give you the most precious thing I own”,
as he undid the lanyard of his wooden “hat” and laid it gingerly at the feet
of the Rich Man who was now no richer, but a lot wiser...

To quote the Apostle Paul,

*I know what is to be poor and to have plenty,
and I have lived under all kinds of conditions.*

*I know what it means to be full or to be hungry,
to have too much or too little.*

Philippians 4:12

Though God is not mentioned in this story,

God is certainly represented by the principle of *grace*.

The wooden bowl with a lanyard is alternately
a stumbling block, a lifesaver, and a wake-up call.

That has certainly been my experience of God’s grace –

the right thing at the right time, helping me to snap out of erroneous thinking
when I was going the wrong way, and get back on the right path.

Willard, p.5

Next week, I will celebrate 20 years of ordained ministry
in the United Church of Christ, but tomorrow, it will be 35 years
since I recommitted my life to Christ –
an event that would directly lead to me answering the call
to ordination.

The day before I left my hometown in New Jersey, to make my way to Japan
en route to my next duty station as a US soldier in South Korea,
a friend of the family gave me the phone number
for a missionary family sponsored by his church.

They led a youth ministry called Hi-BA – High Born Againers
for English-speaking and Japanese-speaking youth.

When I arrived in Tokyo, I checked in to a US military hotel
and called the next day, but missed them.

I tried the following day – just as a typhoon was approaching,
and this time they answered.

John Meyer said, “We’re coming to pick you up!”

I still had laundry in the hotel dry cleaning, but they came anyway,
in the midst of a storm, and took me with them.

I woke up the next morning on tatami mats of their camp lodge.

I stayed with them a week and on Thursday, October 24th, 1981,
John took off work for the day to show me a medieval village
in the Japanese countryside.

We walked out to a temple complex about a quarter mile away,
and for some reason, I started to sing the Doxology to myself.

On the way back, John said he wanted to show me a beautiful lake...

The landscape in Japan is just magical – like being on another planet.

As we were driving around the lake and going up into the hills,

John said something out of the blue,

“If God is who he said he is, then God cannot lie...”

Then he asked me, “Have you been saved?”

I had been waiting for this all week, and I said,

“Yes!” which I considered to be the experience I had at

high school summer camp at Bethany Beach, Delaware 10 years before.

But then, I said, “What are the words?”

I had never made a public statement that I was a Christian.

Immediately, John turned the van into a scenic overlook.

We parked and got out to see the sun setting in the west, beautiful colors
of autumn, sharp contrast of light and shadow

I thought, “God, you didn’t have to go to all the trouble!”

Then again, I would remember a sunset, because I love them...

Willard, p.6

Standing on the edge of a precipice with the lake below,
and mountain ranges going off into infinity,
John Meyer led me in a prayer of confession, acceptance,
and profession of Jesus Christ as my savior...

Afterwards – as I was leaving to go the airport that would take me to Korea,
John Meyer gave me a verse from the Bible to commemorate the event,
and I added a verse that immediately preceded it.

Isaiah 41:9-10 goes like this:

*⁹you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners, saying to you,
“You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
¹⁰fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*

I was as far away as the East is from the West.

I have been helped along the way and
carried through many storms by the grace and humor of God.

I have suffered for the Name, but I would gladly go through it all again
to try better the next time.

So, the Jesus Prayer – Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, is true,
because Jesus is who God said he is, and God cannot lie...

Amen

*Our first lesson today comes from 2 Timothy 4:1-8, 16-18
and continues with the counsel and encouragement of the Apostle Paul
as mentor to Timothy – and all of us as followers of Christ...*

- ¹When Christ Jesus comes as king, he will be the judge of everyone,
whether they are living or dead.
So with God and Christ as witnesses, I command you
²to preach God's message.
Do it willingly, even if it isn't the popular thing to do.
You must correct people and point out their sins.
But also cheer them up, and when you instruct them, always be patient.
- ³The time is coming when people won't listen to good teaching.
Instead, they will look for teachers who will please them
by telling them only what they are itching to hear.
- ⁴They will turn from the truth and eagerly listen to senseless stories.
⁵But you must stay calm and be willing to suffer.
You must work hard to tell the good news and to do your job well.
- ⁶Now the time has come for me to die.
My life is like a drink offering being poured out on the altar.
- ⁷I have fought well. I have finished the race, and I have been faithful.
⁸So a crown will be given to me for pleasing the Lord.
He judges fairly, and on the day of judgment he will give a crown to me
and to everyone else who wants him to appear with power.
- ¹⁶When I was first put on trial, no one helped me.
In fact, everyone deserted me. I hope it won't be held against them.
¹⁷But the Lord stood beside me.
He gave me the strength to tell his full message, so that all Gentiles would hear it.
And I was kept safe from hungry lions.
- ¹⁸The Lord will always keep me from being harmed by evil,
and he will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.
Praise him forever and ever! Amen.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 18:9-14

⁹ [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others:

¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray,
one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself,
‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust,
adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

¹² I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.’

¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off,
would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying,
‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’

¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts [themselves] will be humbled, but [the ones] who [humble themselves] will be exalted.”