

## 2019 10 27 – Connecting to God

### Luke 18:9-14

Have you ever asked yourself, “Why do I come to church?” That might be a question that would come to mind when the alarm wakes you from deep sleep on a Sunday morning or when the sun is shining and the lake is calling as you drive to this building to sit inside for an hour or more. “Why do you come to church?” If someone asked you that question how would you answer it? (*leave time for answers*)

Many of you may have already turned to the back of your bulletin and found a list that the Pew Research Centre put together just over a year ago. They surveyed people in the United States and asked those who attend religious services at least once a month, “Why do you go to church?” People were allowed to choose more than one reason. The list on your bulletin contains the top ten reasons that people gave. The list includes reasons like: connecting with God, personal growth and faith formation, pastoral care, community, belonging, tradition and even harmony within the family. I expect that if that same question was asked to those in the United Church of Canada we might also find answers connected to outreach and social justice. There is such a wide variety of reasons that people have for joining a church community and gathering together on a Sunday morning. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/09/us/pew-church-10-reasons/index.html>

This week, as I was reading Jesus' parable from the gospel of Luke, I found myself wondering why the men in that story were in the Jewish Temple on that particular day. The parable says that they "went up to the Temple to pray." But what was their motivation? What brought the Pharisee to his place in the sanctuary and why was the tax collector standing at a distance in this sacred place? What do you think?

Let's start with the Pharisee. The Pharisee was the one who prayed saying, "I give you thanks, O God, that I'm not like others – greedy, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn." If you were to pick the Pharisee's reasons for going to Temple from the list in the bulletin, what might they be? (*wait for answers – better person, tradition, moral foundation, connection with God*)

What about the tax collector, why was he there? Remember, the tax collector was the one who kept his eyes lowered and said, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Why did he go to Temple that day? (*wait for answers – forgiveness/connection with God, tradition*)

Each of these men had their own valid reasons for being in the temple that day and each of came from very different places in their community. The Pharisee was a respected leader, a learned man who people went to for advice on how to live their lives. The tax collector was, on the other hand, viewed as a traitor to his Jewish community. Tax collectors worked for the Romans, the oppressors. There were also often thieves who took more than was required and kept it for

themselves. The Pharisee had reason to be thankful and the tax collector had reason to ask for forgiveness.

So what's the punchline? Why did Jesus tell this parable? According to the author of the gospel of Luke, it was a parable warning us to be humble: "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted."

But this is where this parable can get a little tricky. Because when you read it in that straightforward way – don't be self-righteous like the Pharisee, but instead be humble like the tax collector – we could easily end up praying, "God, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or even like that Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to the sermon, increase our givings each year, and we have learned that we should always be humble." Yikes... suddenly in our wish to be different than the Pharisee, we end up sounding just like him.

At the end of the parable, Jesus said, "Believe me, the tax collector went home from the Temple right with God, while the Pharisee didn't." This parable is about "being right with God." "Being right with God" means having a deep connection with the sacred. "Being right with God" means knowing in our hearts that God loves us unconditionally. "Being right with God" is not something that we can earn by doing. It's not something that is based on our abilities or our accomplishments. It's not something that can be measured relative to our friends or neighbours. The Pharisee can't escape this fact, and neither can we.

Why do we come to church? Well, according to the Pew survey, over 80% are here to be become closer to God. We want a deeper connection with the Holy Mystery, the Essence of Love. We are here because we have recognized the fact that we cannot do this thing called life on our own. We are here because no matter what we've done or not done, we all need to be loved and accepted for who we are and we know that the only place we can find unconditional and unending love is with God.

The tax collector was "right with God" because he recognized his need and he opened his heart to receive God's love and acceptance. When we do that, when we realize our own need, when we open our hearts to God then we discover that God is already right with us, that God has never stopped loving us, that in God's eyes we are already holy, beloved and perfect. This is why we come to church – because we recognize our need for love and acceptance. We come to be reminded that God's love is unconditional and never-ending.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. On this day we remember all the reasons why we are part of this church family and we give thanks. On this day we remember all the ways that this congregation has supported us in our lives and we express our gratitude. On this day we acknowledge the deep need that brings us back to this sanctuary Sunday after Sunday and we offer our time, our talent and our wealth so that others may receive as we have received. May it be so Amen.