Joel 2:23-32 | **Ordinary 30**
Luke 18:9-14

The Worst Good Man

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Robert Duvall is my favorite actor. The roles he takes are often characters that are complicated and nuanced, and usually they evolve over the course of the film. In *The Apostle*[1], he is Eulis "Sonny" Dewey, a Texas evangelist at the center of his own story. In the opening scene, Sonny and his mother (played by June Carter Cash) happen on a can accident on a rural road. One car is off in a field, and Sonny dodges through the police perimeter to "minister" to a badly injured young couple, and the woman immobile and the husband barely conscious. Sonny starts in assertively on the injured man, to get him to call on Jesus and save his soul before he dies. Sonny shrugs off the state trooper who tells him to leave, then starts to witness to the officer. Sonny is absolutely sincere, and within the framework of evangelical fundamentalism, his behavior makes sense to him. When he gets back to the car and his waiting mother, he boasts: "We made news in heaven today!" (If there was any good done to the injured husband, Sonny has obviously mistaken the agency of grace.) In a subsequent scene, he heads out to a 3-week revival circuit, and Duvall (who is also the Director) cuts to the vanity license plate of the big Chrysler, which reads: SONNY.

Gospel-writer Luke says, *Jesus told this parable t some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. 'Two men went to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.'* He told it to shut down those who thought they'd banked up some good credit with God, but were clueless to their own arrogance. The Pharisee was what Mark Twain called "a good man in the worst sense of the word."[2] Like Eulis Sonny Dewey, I guess. Parables are short and punchy, so the characters are one-dimensional, cartoon-like. The Pharisee prayed a version of the ancient Jewish morning prayer for males, which thanked God for not making the speaker a Gentile, a slave or a woman. In this version, he gives thanks that he was not like other people – "thieves, rogues, adulterers, or that tax-collector over there…" All his verbs are in the first person. We can hear the echoes of Emerson: "What you are stands over you all the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary."[3]

But when Luke wrote his Gospel, 70 or80 years or more after Jesus, Pharisees were even more of a force than when Jesus first told this parable. After Rome had destroyed the Temple, they took control of religious authority both in Jerusalem and in the Diaspora – the scattered Jewish community throughout Asia Minor. During that time they finalized the canon of the Hebrew scriptures and developed the Talmud and the Mishnah that interpreted scripture. To our ears the Pharisee sounds as self-righteous as Jesus thought he was. But Jesus' original listeners would have heard nothing odd in his words. The Pharisees were the most religious people in Israel. What would have shocked them was to hear, at the parable's end, that it was the tax-collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified.

The other character is the tax-collector. Let's not romanticize him, any more than we should overly cast the Pharisee as a heartless villain. He is not the gangster with a secret heart of gold. He's a tax-collector. They made a profit beyond their pay. They had a lot of ways to steal from their own people; the Romans expected them to skim off the top. In Jewish society, they had abrogated their civil rights, they were shunned by others, and were synonymous with robbers. In the parable there is no indication that he intends to resign as an agent of the Roman Empire. He is what he is. The parable wants us to hear this in terms with which we are unfamiliar. By the end of the parable, they have changed roles, in a way. But why?

New Testament scholar Jeremias wrote: "What fault had the Pharisee committed? And what had the (tax-collector) done by way of reparation? Jesus does not go into this question. He simply says: That is God's decision."[4] While the Pharisee was technically correct, he prayed himself into a corner, into a place where he alienated others, separated himself from them. He wasn't judged because what he said was not true, but for comparing himself to others in a way that denigrated them. The language in the parable is concise and powerful. The Pharisee was standing by himself – we might assume that he was avoiding contact with the ritually unclean that may have been there. The tax-collector was "standing far off", maybe nervous about invading sacred space, and there was distance between them… distance between the two of them, and distance from others. But the self-aware sinner seeking forgiveness is the one who finds God.

It was not that the tax-collector was good and the Pharisee was bad – far from it. The tax-collector had no list of either virtues or failings; he simply named his condition – a sinner, and threw himself on God's mercy. Of the two, who really prayed? And how badly do we have to mess up to gain the humility of the tax-collector? Pretty badly, for some of us. German theologian Karl Barth wrote of this text that both were equally "shamed" before God, the difference being the Pharisee is ignorant of his standing.[5] C.S. Lewis wrote, "A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you."[6]

Which one of these two men is the good guy in this parable? Neither one. GOD is the hero of this parable. What both these pray-ers receive is in *spite* of them, not *because* of them. C.S. Lewis also observes "the roof of a greenhouse does not attract the sun because it is bright, but becomes bright when the sun shines on it."[7] A God who only blesses the pious is a God who could be manipulated by our prayers; that can't be right. We don't earn grace, even by faithful and ethical behavior. It is all God's mercy. What happens is an absolute reversal of what human judgment, or even religious judgment, would expect. But throughout scripture God humbles the proud and lifts up the lowly. Immediately after this parable, Luke tells the story of Jesus welcoming the children, where Jesus said: "The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." That is no accident.

The prophet Joel (in our Old Testament text) finally writes good news for the people who had seen terrible times, but had returned from exile, and the Second Temple was reconstructed. Drought gave way to rain, God gave fruit in due season, judgment became salvation as the people were reconciled to God. Both the confession of faith and redemption were for everybody, for the whole community, and cut across all barriers. Centuries later the Apostle Paul would, in Romans 10:13, quote this passage to show that "everyone" includes Gentiles too. Like the tax-collector in the parable, when we know any stature we have before God comes from God's mercy alone, we might look on our neighbors with a little more grace.

We might do well to ask, "What does this parable mean for Americans in an election cycle?" in this time when our nation seems so polarized and public language about grace and mercy is in very short supply. Obviously I can't and won't endorse a candidate, or anything like that. I will say, "Go vote" because local elections may matter most– and don't forget the District Attorney Forum that faith in action has organized at Sardis Missionary Baptist Thursday night. But – about this parable and what it says to us this Fall – let me suggest how to read it. We are so accustomed to these stories that the characters have become stock characters and we pay them no mind. Read the parable, but put into the place of the Pharisee the opposite person you might have been inclined to see there. And same with the tax-collector.

What if the one in the Pharisee role were to say, "Thank you God, for letting me be born with a social conscience, not greedy and opportunistic like hedge fund manager over there! And thanks for my active church, where I'm serving on a ministry team, volunteering at First Light, and teaching inner city kids to read! " But which one went home justified? Or the one in the Pharisee role were to say, "Thank you God that I'm not like those other people – swindlers, corrupt officials, and people like that Payday lender over there! I'm responsible with my business, support my church, and care enough for my community to volunteer for board leadership, etc." But which one went home justified? The problem starts when we compare ourselves with others, and start to puff up.

Jesus may not have meant this parable as general instruction (He himself took plenty of jabs at the Pharisees), but more as a warning. Luke says he *told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt*. As the old camp tune goes: "It's not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer." You decide how the parable ends.

In Duvall's movie, Sonny Dewey's life, career and marriage fall apart, and he flees to Louisiana ahead of the authorities. Hiding out in a small rural town, working as a mechanic, he becomes involved with a small African-American congregation, renames himself the Apostle E.F., and starts preaching there. He is as much of a mess as King David or the Patriarch Jacob, and though in the end he cannot save himself, he has finally learned to give all of himself for others. When the law caught up with him, he went peacefully, and perhaps he went vindicated.

[1] *The Apostle*, Butcher's Run Films, 1997
[2] Vallet, Ronald. Stepping Stones of the Steward, Eerdmans Press, Grand Rapids, 1989.p. 17.
[3] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Letters and Social Aims, 1875.
[4] Jeremias, Joachim. The Parables of Jesus, Chas. Scribner's Sons, NY 1954, p. 144.
[5] Barth, Karl. Church Dogmatics IV, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1958, p. 185.
[6] Lewis, C.S. Mere Christianity, Scribner's, NY, 1986, p.111.
[7] *ibid*, p. 59.