



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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REFORMATION SUNDAY

It's Not About You Psalm 46; Luke 18:9-14

One of the first bits of news I heard when we returned from sabbatical last month was that Rocky Mount had a roundabout. It was constructed on Sunset Avenue headed toward Nashville, just behind Nash Community College and provides access to a new entrance to the school. For anyone who has not ventured out that way, a roundabout is a circular portion of roadway which provides access to one or more exits to other roads. Instead of having overpasses and ramps or intersections with stop signs, a roundabout is designed to keep traffic moving while enabling access to various roadways. But roundabouts can also be tricky.

We had numerous adventures in Europe, but two of my proudest accomplishments had nothing to do with studying John Milton and the Psalms or exploring the relationship between science and religion. No, my proudest accomplishments were driving on the left side of the road without incident and mastering the English roundabout. The key to getting around and off the roundabout is knowing which lane to take. If you plan to take the first or second exit, you get in the first or left lane. If you want to go further around, you get in the middle or second lane. If the roundabout is rather large with more than four exits, you might even get in the third or far right lane to get off at exit five or six. The problem is that if you get in the wrong lane you risk a) having an accident when you try to get in the proper lane, b) taking the wrong exit which means you have to turn around and get back on the roundabout, or c) getting trapped so that you just go round and round and round on the roundabout. I will confess that a few minutes learning about the quirks of the roundabout and a very well-informed GPS guide helped me navigate this traffic marvel.

It seems to me that the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a lot like a roundabout. If you follow the correct route, you discover a great lesson about the life of faith. However, if you are not careful, the parable can become a trap. You will either head off in the wrong direction or go round and round never getting to where you ought to go.

Professor David Lose of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, helped me navigate this parable.¹ He points out that the parable appears to be straightforward: The Pharisee proudly lauds his righteousness while looking down upon the tax collector. One of the problems we face is that he is telling the truth: he is righteous, at least according to the law. He lives a good life. He observes the law. He fasts. He tithes to the temple treasury. He does not steal or get in brawls or betray his marriage. He certainly does not take advantage of his own people as the tax collector does. The Pharisee's only problem appears to be his inability to have compassion for people like the tax collector, thieves, rogues, and adulterers.

The tax collector, on the other hand, will not even lift his eyes in the temple. He beats his chest and acknowledges his sinfulness, begging for God's mercy. But note that he does not offer repentance. He makes no pledge to change his ways, no hint at repaying what he has wrongly taken, no suggestion that he might even try a more honorable line of work. All he does is acknowledge that he is a sinner and beg for God's mercy.

If you accept the obvious message of the parable and assume that you should be humble like the tax collector, then you are in the wrong lane and getting off on the wrong road. If you decide the Pharisee is spiritually arrogant and you should be humble like the tax collector then you will most likely be glad that you are not like the Pharisee, which will make you just like the Pharisee! And if you walk away from this parable thinking that all you need do is focus on your plight as a sinner, then you have slipped into another wrong lane and are doing nothing but driving round and round in the trap.

Both the Pharisee and the tax collector will go round and round in circles because the Pharisee can see only the laws he observes and the good deeds he does while the tax collector can see only what a hopeless sinner he is. If they take an exit at all, it is the one marked "self" because they are thinking only about themselves rather than about of God.

You see, the trick of this parable is that it causes us to realize how much we focus on ourselves and then spins us around to see that we ought to be looking at God. It is not about you or me or us. It is about God.

Five hundred and ninety-six years ago, on All Hallow's Eve, October 31, 1517, Martin Luther sought to address these very issues. He felt that church

¹David Lose, "The Pharisee, the Tax Collector, and the Reformation," *Dear Working Preacher* (October 21, 2013); available online at: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2813>.

doctrine at the time had gotten off course, had taken the wrong road, and needed to make some corrections. He called for a dialogue in a document known as The Ninety-Five Theses which he nailed to the door of the parish church in Wittenburg, Germany. His action caused, not a healthy dialogue, but a ruthless reaction which eventually led to the Protestant Reformation and a major schism in Christianity.

Luther and other reformers wanted to reiterate the core of the Christian faith, namely that it is about God and not about us. The great motto that emerged from this struggle was “*sola fide, sola scriptura, sola gratia*”: “faith alone, scripture alone, grace alone. The emphasis was that it is faith and not works that opens the door to salvation. Our obedience to the law, our observance of the rules is not what saves us. It is the saving act of Christ which we trust in faith that makes our lives whole again. Furthermore, scripture, rather than human whim, is our authority in matters of faith. Finally, it is God’s grace and that alone that transforms each person and the world into what God desires for us.

Our faith is about God who, out of love too abundant to keep to himself, created this world with all of its resources and wonders and offered it to humanity as a place to live and thrive and worship God. It is about God who, though stung by the self-centeredness of human beings, did not withdraw his love for his finest creation. It is about God who attempted time and time again to communicate his love and desires for us though we would not pay attention.

Christian faith is about God who so desired that humans understand his true nature and dreams for our lives that he took on our form with all of its possibilities and limitations and took on our lives with all of its sorrows and joys. It is about God who so longed for us to know the extent of his love for us that he suffered unjustly for our sakes, participated in our death on the cross, and rose again to life to open the way to eternal life. It is about God who constantly moves toward us, calls us by name, and offers us the graces of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. It is about God—who God is and what God does—but it is not about us.

The Pharisee learned how to follow the rules, live a good life, and say the right things, but he never learned why. He never understood the connection between God’s grace and right living. He never understood the commandment to love one’s neighbor and the reality that the tax collector was his neighbor. The Tax Collector understood that he was a sinner in need of

mercy, but he never understood that grace calls for a change of life. He regretted his actions, he may have abhorred his attitudes, but he never sought to change and live a life worthy of God's mercy. Both men were stuck on the roundabout of religiosity and were unable to choose the right exit to faithful living.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:88) the Apostle Paul told his friends in Ephesus. Paul had been a Pharisee, a keeper of the law. He was a good, observant Jew. When he met Christ on the road to Damascus, however, his understanding of God was changed. He discovered God to be the center of his life, the source of his hope, and the Shepherd of his Spirit. Paul, who from time to time exhibited a bit of spiritual arrogance himself, returned time and time again to the ultimate truth that our salvation is about God and not us. Writing to believers in Rome who might have had pharisaical tendencies, he reminded them,

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. Romans 3.23-28

In other words, there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Our salvation is the work of God and the gift of grace. To those among us who take the attitude of the tax collector, Paul wrote,

“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20)

We have only to look to the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) to discover the happy ending of this parable for a tax collector. Zacchaeus, as we know, was a chief tax collector. He had built a thriving business extorting money from fellow Jews and others under his authority. He was despised by

his own people. When Jesus approached Zacchaeus and offered him grace, the tax collector turned his life around. He found the right exit, offered to make amends for his sins, and pledged to live a life worthy of the grace he had received. It was not because Zacchaeus repented that he received grace. It was because of God's grace that Zacchaeus repented and experienced the renewed life God offers us all.

Two people entered the temple or church or place of prayer and both took a wrong turn. God in Christ, however, showered his grace upon them and pointed them in the right direction, and they were transformed.

It is not about you. It is not about me. It is not about us. It is about God and his grace which leads us to faith and wholeness of life. Thanks be to God! Amen.

October 27, 2013

The Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is obvious through the witness of scripture and clear through our own experience that all manner of events will happen in our lives, O God. There are likely to be hardships and challenges as well as disasters and heartbreaks. Your promise is that you will not abandon us during the difficult times nor be far from us in the best of times for as our Creator and Heavenly Parent, you will always take care of us.

We are grateful for such an assurance, especially in times that do challenge our trust. Help us to keep our focus upon you, O God, and to willingly place our lives in your hands no matter the circumstances.

Today we look to you for healing of our illnesses, for clarity from our confusion, for comfort in our sorrow, and for hope in our distress. We call on you for forgiveness, we come to you for repentance, we ask you for salvation. We also bring to you our adoration, offer to you our allegiance, and pledge to you our faithfulness for your glory and our sakes.

Do have mercy upon this world which you have created, O God, and for which you sent your Son, our Savior, to redeem and set right. Grant guidance to all of our leaders who sincerely seek what is right and urge repentance on all leaders who would risk the health and well-being of their people for personal gain. Help us all to open our hearts to your heart that we might be renewed and refreshed.

Be our hope for life that is full and complete and our shelter against all storms, O God. Surround us with your grace, fill us with your peace, and enable us to love you all the more; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.