

Once Upon a Time

Text: Luke 18: 9-14

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

July 10, 2016

Once upon a time. Or does it begin, "There once was a man with two sons." Or then again, "A certain woman had ten silver coins." Or, maybe, "A man was going down the Jericho Road." Or was it, "A sower went out to sow."

There is no doubt. Jesus was an amazingly creative storyteller. He spoke in parables and aphorisms with unusual evocative power. He looked to the common everyday world in his midst and spun out images that lifted the minds and hearts of his listeners. Quite often, he baffled and surprised them. He messed with their assumptions. And he knew. He knew if he had any chance of imparting the large truth of God to the lives of people on the ground it would be by the power of story.

Garrison Keillor is one of my favorite storytellers. He stepped away from the microphone these recent days to retire, and though I'm saddened by that I am so grateful that he filled up many of my Saturday evenings with his Prairie Home Companion tugs and tales. Just to think: he was able to make an almost entirely non-existent place called Lake Woebegone a platform for talking about things that really matter. And he did it by letting us listen in and overhear stories that snuck in the side door and disarmed any measure of pretense.

Twenty-some years ago he was overheard talking about stories and Christian faith. "I think that people want to hear the gospel in the form of a story. And there is or should be a story at the heart of every sermon," he said. "Sermons fail, and some horribly, when preachers take that story, stick it in a corner, and make it a lecture!"¹

So let's place a story of Jesus front-and center this morning. I'm sure that we've all heard it before, but maybe by listening again, something new will touch deeply, as if for the first time.

"Two men went up to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. The other was a tax collector." He had his hook baited and in the water that quickly and I'll bet dollars to donuts that heads were turning his way.

It was coded language with it's own subtext. Everyone in his day knew that a Pharisee was a keeper of religious law, a kind of professional holy man of the day, not quite a priest but darn close. And just by the sound of his words, such detail was filling up the minds of his listeners. And the other, just as surely, a tax-collector, who in first century Palestine had the onerous reputation of being somewhere on the spectrum between dishonest at best and a thief at his lesser moments.

His use of contrast and caricature are stunning. Even brilliant. And though life rarely presents itself as binary as this, simply one way or another, he trusts the capacity of his audience to hear beneath the temptation of the extremes.

And then he goes on. The Pharisee, (who'da'ever'guessed'it?), was completely overfilled with himself. He did not reflect what holiness means – that of being near to God. In fact, he was so much in his own way that his prayer blocked even the possibility of relationship to God with arrogance and his own personal brand of hubris.

"O God, I thank you that I am not like these others." He didn't use the term low-life but he was probably thinking it. "I tithe, I fast, I pray." He may also have been thinking words like . . . "perfect" . . . "unblemished" . . . "infallible" . . . "superior" . . . "right."

I once heard of an adolescent learning to drive. "You know how notorious adolescent infallibility can be. His mom was teaching him. A sudden rain began so mom suggested she would drive the rest of the way home. He had never driven in the rain and insisted that he needed the experience. She acquiesced, but reluctantly, and as he continued on she began to offer a steady stream of advice. The boy snapped at her to cut it out. She snapped back, 'I don't know what you know and what you don't know – I'm only trying to help!' 'Mom,' he said, 'until further notice, just assume that I know everything!'"²

And then Jesus shifts the focus. Thankfully. Vividly. Redemptively. His parable opens up the truth that knowing it all is not the best or better way when it comes to conversation with God. In fact, it's not the best or better way in any sphere of life.

So the other man now, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring even so much as to look up, the tax-collector also prayed: "Dear God, have mercy on me. Forgive me, a sinner."

And in that honest moment, the lesser of the two portrayed by Jesus became the greater one, and the attributes of humility and contrition trumped those of arrogance and self-promotion.

Lucy is talking to Linus. "Linus has become aware of his hands for some reason and gets carried away by the marvelous potential for doing great things. They might build bridges. They might heal the sick. They might hit some home runs." Lucy is unimpressed and typically laced with cynicism. She quickly brings Linus back down to earth. Glancing briefly at his hands she says, "Linus, you've got jelly on them."³

Note the shift. It was a humbling moment. An honest moment. A less than we thought moment. A moment of gravity. "You've got jelly on your hands." Of course, she was telling the truth for all of us. It's simply a part of the human condition. "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

No amount of theologizing . . . could have made that more succinct or better understood than a story that day; a parable, spun from the heart of Jesus! Nor could he have done better or more with the five brief verses we are given.

So it lands right here. I have absolutely no idea where the truth of his telling touches down in you today, if in fact, anywhere at all. Still, it's all so masterfully delivered: a lesson on prayer, a juxtaposition of temperament and personality, and this spectrum of arrogance and humility as people just like us live our lives before God.

One more thing. I don't know if all that I have told you happened in exactly the way I've conveyed, or the precise sequence we have traced in this story of Jesus. But I do know that it is the Word of God reflected in scripture and delivered in story for us today, and we can trust it as true. So, please, let's listen deeply until we hear it come home to our own hearts. Amen.

© 2016 Charles Geordie Campbell.

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ "Caught Reading" in *Christian Century*, April 10, 1996, p. 389.

² Kathleen Norris. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. Riverhead Books, 1998, pp. 369-370

³ Chandler W. Gilbert. *When I Open My Window*. Grenfell Reading Center, 2001, pp. 114-115