

Kim and I returned last night from the funeral in Washington, North Carolina, celebrating the life of Kim's uncle, Louis Forrest, former CEO of EG Forrest, a company founded by his grandfather, and which became one of the larger mid-Atlantic produce distributors. I had the privilege of officiating at Louis' wedding 20 years ago to Kim's Aunt Sharon, and so was invited to say a few words at the memorial. Louis was bigger than life, staunch Republican, strongly opinionated, and one of those guys who when they walked into a room, filled it immediately. What I loved about Louis was that as large and in charge as he was, he had a heart of gold. He was full of contradictions, and so is Jesus' parable for today...

We already know Jesus' punchline, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke, the gospel writer, makes it clear Jesus tells this parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Such an easy mark. Smug, self-righteous Pharisee, bad. Humble, penitent Tax Collector, good.

In fact, the first century audience hearing this would have been shocked to hear the Pharisee portrayed as the bad guy. On the contrary, Tax collectors were uniformly hated by the Jews of Jesus' day as they were seen, at best, as collaborators with the Roman occupiers, or at worst, as traitors to the Jewish nation. Jesus puts down the religiously upstanding Pharisee and lifts up the low-life Roman lackey. Which begs the questions how we might interpret the meaning of the parable for today?

You see, we are much more similar to the Pharisee than we are to the Tax Collector. We live in New Canaan, for God's sakes, and are Presbyterians. We like things done decently and in order, lawns kept trim, shirts starched, shoes polished. We dutifully attend worship services, patiently listen to another tedious sermon, generously put dollars in the offering plate and say our prayers for another week.

Notice the detail of the Tax Collector standing “far off.” He likely feared the more zealous of the faithful. He had no business showing up in the Temple, presuming to come before God, judge of the living and the dead... I would suggest that most people like the Tax Collector today don’t even show up in church. The Church has made it painfully clear over the centuries that we are really here only for a certain type of people. It may vary from congregation to congregation, but it’s astonishing how easy it is for us religious folk to draw lines to clarify who’s in and who’s out!

Very rarely is there that sense that you may truly come as you are... that we take seriously God’s declaration that “My house shall be a house of prayer for all people” (Isaiah 56:7). But that’s what is so beautiful about special church that we’re celebrating today. Everyone truly is welcome. Many of you have heard of Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest who wrote dozens of books and lectured at Harvard and Yale back in the day. He had the opportunity to spend a year in France in 1985, a year that changed his life....

Nouwen left the academy and headed for the village of Trosly in France, seeking a place that would lead him “closer to the heart of God.” Arriving at *L’Arche* community, a community of special needs people, he felt as if he had finally “come home.” After returning from a year at L’Arche, Henri chose to live permanently at L’Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada.

It’s counter-intuitive, but it is in special church, a similar community, where you can experience unconditional love. I love the fact that Nicky, for example, welcomes me with a big hug and unabashedly tells me, “I love you.” It may seem uncomfortable at first, but when we let our defenses down, we experience in Special Church genuine acceptance and love. No strings attached, not pretensions, no presumptions, and no arrogance. It’s wonderfully disarming. Sure, our Special church siblings have good days and bad days; good, bad and ugly thoughts and feelings just like the rest of us. But there is genuine openness to others that is unfiltered and unguarded.

Maybe that’s why we are secretly attracted to the Tax Collector in this story. There’s no way he can defend himself. He can only be the recipient of God’s grace and unmerited favor. When he cries out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” It is *this* man, Jesus concludes, who goes home “Justified.” This word,

dedikaiomenos occurs only once in the New Testament, but its root is common, *dikaios*, which simply means just or righteous. What's interesting (don't be alarmed, but I'm going to go Greek Geek on you here) ... This verb is a *perfect participle passive*, meaning that the action being described was done unto this man and that it is an action that has been completed. In other words, through his confession, the Tax Collector has been made once and for all justified. The implications of this are important, in that it gets more at the state of this person's heart rather than the perfection of this person's actions. It's scandalous, really. This man knows he is broken before God, and that he has nothing to offer but his confession. It doesn't say that he's going to stop being a Tax Collector. Yet Jesus declares him to be right with God...

The obvious point is that if we come to meet God, we come because we know we need a blessing. We may not say it verbally, but we say it inwardly, "Have mercy on me..." We want some sign, some assurance that it's going to be OK. That we are OK...

I love the story about how one day at L'Arche, a disabled community member named Janet came up and asked Henri Nouwen for a blessing. Henri was distracted by other things, so he quickly traced the sign of the cross on her forehead.

"No," protested Janet. "I want a real blessing!"

Henri understood how he had been insensitive to her need. He promised at the next prayer service, he would have a special blessing for her.

At the end of the prayer service, about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor. Henri announced, "Janet has asked me for a special blessing."

He didn't quite know what she was seeking from him, but her next move left no doubt. She walked up to him and wrapped her arms around him. As he embraced her in return, her slight form was almost covered by the folds of the white robe he wore while leading worship.

As they held each other, Henri said "Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile,

your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things you do show what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.”

Janet raised her head and looked at him. Her beaming smile told him that she had truly understood and received the blessing.

What happened next was unexpected. As Janet returned to her place, another woman raised her hand. She, too, wanted a blessing. She stood up and embraced Henri, too, laying her face against his chest. After that, a great many more of the disabled members of the community took their turn, coming up for the same sort of blessing.

For Henri, the most touching moment was when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old college student, raised his hand and asked, “And what about me?” John was a big, burly young man, an athlete. Henri did the same with him, wrapping his arms around him and saying, “John, it is so good that you are here. You are God's Beloved Son...”

John looked back with tears in his eyes and simply said, “Thank you, thank you very much.”¹

I love that story. Maybe it’s not so much about whether you’re a Pharisee or a Tax Collector, but rather that we all need a blessing, whether we be the Louis Forrests or the Janets of our world. Blessing. Nothing more, and nothing less. Maybe we need to remember to cry out, “Have mercy on me, a sinner,” and know that even there, in the confession of our brokenness, we can discover God’s gracious love that sets us free for new life. So, friends, may we go home today, humbly but confident that we are justified, blessed, loved.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 70-72.