

“Not Like Those People!”

Meditation on Luke 18:9-14

Oct. 23, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

*Jesus also told this parable to some who were self confident, regarding themselves as upright and **all others** as worthless: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am **not like other people**: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven; he struck his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man, rather than the other, is the one who went home upright in the sight of God; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’*

I was blessed to meet and get to know Ed and Eunju Huls this week. They are candidates for the choir director and organist positions at our church. Eunju is originally from South Korea. She grew up in church. Her mother was a pastor who encouraged her children’s faith and musical gifts. Eunju studied piano, then voice. She earned a degree in music from a university in Seoul. She studied in Italy, earning an artist diploma in voice. She served as resident artist at the Des Moines Metropolitan Opera. She has sung professionally with symphonies and opera companies across the U.S. and around the world. Her church experience includes serving as a children’s choir conductor, alto soloist, organist, pianist and music minister. She currently serves a church in Connecticut. She has a heart of compassion and has served as a music missionary to people in need with a group called, “Music from Above.”

Ed, her husband, serves as the music pastor at a church in New Jersey. He is a native of Michigan and was raised in the Christian

Reformed Church. He graduated from Calvin College and served in the U.S. Army, traveling and performing with the U.S. Army Field Band and Soldiers Chorus. He has worked as an opera singer all over the world, with opera companies such as New York City, Chicago Lyric, Tampa Bay, Augusta, Boston, Pittsburgh, Florentine, Baton Rouge, Cincinnati, Michigan and Texas. He served as volunteer youth advocate and mentor for about 15 years.

On Wednesday, though, when the Huls arrived at Orlando airport, they were simply passengers stuck on an American Airlines flight, waiting on the plane for a gate attendant about 30 minutes after landing.

“Welcome to Orlando!!” I texted him, when he told me about the delay. “At least it isn’t raining!” I said, thinking of a scene in the movie, “Young Frankenstein.” Gene Wilder and Marty Feldman are digging up a body in a cemetery at night . Gene complains, and Marty, his assistant, says, “It could be worse. It could be raining.” And then it starts to pour!

I was also remembering one of our visits to Florida last year when I was to meet with the PNC. Our plane landed in Orlando in a terrible storm. Lightning prevented our luggage from being unloaded. We waited more than hour at the terminal for our drenched suitcase while our hosts circled the airport in their car, waiting to pick us up.

Ed didn’t know about my experiences with Orlando airport, and he probably wasn’t thinking about *Young Frankenstein* when he texted back to me, “Patience is getting low.”

Finally, the Huls departed the plane and then walked right by us without us noticing--or them noticing us! I had tried to save them a few steps by waiting for them at the top of the escalator to the baggage claim

area, instead of at baggage claim, where I said we would be. Ed texted me from baggage claim, "We are here at 25 B side... We don't see you." Jim and I headed down the escalator, then, and Ed met us at the bottom with a big smile and hand outstretched.

"You look like pastors," he said graciously. "I'm Ed Huls."

Our adventures with the Huls continued throughout the next 3 days as Jim and I introduced them to our family, community and church. We discovered that we have many things in common, including a love for Italian cooking! We went to a little Italian restaurant before bringing them to our home, where they would stay the first night.

We were relieved to discover the Huls are crazy about animals. Mabel our Pomeranian greeted them with her usual sharp barking and excessive energy, demanding attention and trying to push away our other pets. Eunjoo tried to take a picture of Mabel --she loves taking pictures with her phone, like I do-- but she had a hard time getting Mabel to stand still. She fell in love with our sheltie, Molly. They took a selfie. The Huls met our cat, Melvyn, and showed us photos of their green-eyed tuxedo cat named "Happy."

They met the choir Wednesday night and led the rehearsal, beginning and ending with prayer. On Thursday, we drove along a river road and went to see the beach, where Ed promptly took off his shoes and ran into the rough surf. Eunjoo took his picture and almost lost her shoes in the tide. That's when I discovered she loves shoes--like I do! Before Ed and Eunjoo's interview on Thursday night, we enjoyed lunch with Elaine Kicklighter in Cocoa Village. . We had brunch with Arleigh and Ok Sun Sharpe on Friday and supper at the Smiths' beautiful home

Friday night. We swapped stories and learned that Pat used to have pet ducks. I took a photo of their dog, Bailey, as we said goodbye.

In between all our activities and conversations since Wednesday, Eunjoo and Ed rehearsed at the church every day. They want to do their best for the Lord and serve His Church--sharing the gospel through the music. For all that the Huls and the Crawfords have in common, the important thing we share is faith! The bond of Jesus Christ overcomes all barriers that human beings create between people. Our faith empowers us to love when the world urges us to hate! How can we refuse to love others and show mercy when we know that we are ALL sinners, in need of God's love, mercy and grace?

Jesus is teaching through parables, once again, in our reading today in Luke 18. This parable sometimes called, "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector," immediately follows the "Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge." Both teach us about prayer--how we should persevere in prayer, for the Lord will answer! --and how we must always pray with a humble and contrite heart, before the God who is "compassionate and gracious," says Psalm 103:8, "slow to anger and abounding in love." Both parables start with a brief introduction summing up the lesson. The first begins, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." The second, while summing up the lesson, also makes a statement about the audience. They "were self-confident" or "trusted in themselves" "regarding themselves as upright and **all others** as worthless."

Today's parable begs the question, "Who is Jesus' audience--who are the "some" who **trust in themselves** as upright?" Who are the ones with no need for God, believing they are without sin? They are not only better than everyone else, "**everyone else is worthless**"! Up to this point in Luke, Jesus' audience is a mixture of disciples and other hearers, including Pharisees and scribes. I think Luke means to keep his audience, which includes us, wondering, "Is Jesus talking to us?" Luke wants us to ask ourselves, "Do I think I am better than others? Do I see other people's sins but fail to notice my own? Do I think that I don't really need God and His grace?" What do our hearts tell us?

The Pharisee is proud, informing God of his ability to follow the laws. He is "thankful to God," which is a good beginning for a prayer, but what he's thankful for is that he doesn't do the sins he recognizes in other people--he doesn't steal, and he isn't unfaithful in his marriage. He isn't even like the tax collector, he says, who has also come to the temple to pray, but a very different prayer. Everyone in Jesus' society believes the tax collectors are traitors, Jewish people working for the Roman Empire and getting rich off their Jewish communities, many of which are poor. Of course, it is good that the Pharisee is not a robber or adulterer and that he tithes and fasts twice a week! Some may argue that the man is trying to do what is required of him. He **is** in the temple praying. Other people looking at him and his life, not knowing how he views people with contempt, might find nothing objectionable about him. The community might even look up to him as an example. But God doesn't look on the outward appearance. He sees the heart! (1 Sam. 16:7)

It isn't what we do that makes us right before God! What saves us is

GOD alone, in His mercy and grace! We please the Lord when we humble ourselves before him, confessing our sins and unworthiness, recognizing our need for Him. It would be a shocking discovery for Jesus' first audience--that God loves and forgives even the most despised people in their community-- including tax collectors who humbly confess.

Friends, who are we to criticize others and judge others--when "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?" (Romans 3:23) Who are we to look down on *anyone* with contempt, when Jesus says "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and he who humbles himself will be exalted." We all have different life experiences, ideas and opinions. But we all share the most important thing--our faith. During this divisive and judgmental political environment in our country, when humility, trust and kindness seem to be at an all-time low, let us remember our witness and unity as the Body of Christ. Let us remember when the Lord came, he knocked down dividing walls between people, as Ephesians 2:14 says, "For he alone is our peace." With Christ living inside us, we can overcome the barriers that human beings create. Our faith empowers us to love when the world urges us to hate! How can we refuse to love others and show mercy when we know that we are ALL sinners, in need of God's love, mercy and grace?

Let us pray.

Holy One, thank you for your love, mercy and grace and for your Word that convicts us of how we sometimes take you and our salvation for granted! Thank you for your Son's willingness to die for our sins and for your patience with us as we continue to struggle with sinful attitudes and behaviors. Keep us from being overly critical of others and from judging people and refusing to acknowledge and confess our own sins. Help us, Lord, to live out the faith that you have given us, witnessing to the unity of Christ's Body and your love and grace. Lead us to forgive quickly and not be prideful and hold onto our hurts. Humble us, Lord, so that we return to you with all our hearts. Make us into the faithful servants you desire us to be. In Christ we pray. Amen.