

# MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY OCTOBER 27, 2019

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## "A Nibble of Humble Pie"

Based on Luke 18:9-14

The tax collector slipped into the cool darkness of the temple and made his way quietly into his favourite corner: deep in the shadows, far from the altar, unseen by most as they made their way to the front to offer their prayers. This was not the first time the tax collector had come to the temple, when the weight of the world became too heavy to bear. Here, in the solace of this holy place, he could find the solitude he craved, a quiet spot away from the jeers of the marketplace, a place where he was neither friend nor foe. He simply was.

His was not an easy life. The Romans were very clever at choosing the most desperate of men or the men of cheapest values to do their tax work. "Take one of their own," the authorities in Rome had said, "and pay them well to collect the taxes on our behalf. They people will despise him until the day he dies, but his heavy coin purse will keep him loyal to us. It will pit citizen against citizen, but our hands will be clean, and Caesar will be pleased."

And so it was that shady men, who saw no wrong in skimming a little off the top, and desperate men anxious only to put food on the table for their families, became labeled and ridiculed as the nameless 'tax collectors.' I wonder which man our tax collector was?

FOR THOSE  
WHO MAKE  
THEMSELVES  
GREAT WILL BE  
HUMBLED, AND  
THOSE WHO  
HUMBLE  
THEMSELVES  
WILL BE MADE  
GREAT.

~Luke 18:14 (GNT)

And as he sat quietly in the corner, and

*"would not even look up to heaven" (v13)*

or perhaps, could not look up to heaven, a grand commotion began to take place at the entrance to the temple. A Pharisee: a man of importance and influence, a learned man, a man who knew how to play the game about town. He

strode down the aisle with deliberate stride, chest puffed out, and with great pomp and circumstance. When he reached the front, he carefully looked to his left and his right to see who was within listening distance, and out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the tax collector, looking weary and burdened in the corner. A malicious smile crossed his face. He began to pray.

*God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. (v11)*

And then he sat down.

- Very proud.
- Very pleased with himself.
- Very smug at the snide literary wit he had slipped into his 'prayer'.
- Most of the crowd gathered nodded their heads in quiet agreement.

I am reminded of a funeral I presided over many years ago, when a family member insisted on speaking at the last minute. The woman then proceeded to berate each member of the immediate family in the front row, with verbal insults and hurtful jabs

for over forty-five minutes. With the sweetest, most tender tone of voice, she tore apart each individual with careful execution of words and phrases, and then gracefully sat down and smiled at me as if she had just finished addressing the Queen herself.

I was horrified. I did not know the family well, and there might have been some truth to what she said. But this was neither the time nor the place. I mean, what do you say after a barrage like that? If I recall, the only thing I could think to do after that, and the deep gorge of awkward silence that followed it, was to say, "Let us pray..."

Of course, we are to be aghast at the Pharisees words and actions. That was the point of Jesus telling the story.

- This was not a prayer.
  - This was a moment of self-indulgence on the part of the Pharisee.
  - This was a moment of public scorning for all those 'who did not fit the mold.'
  - This was a moment to poke scorn at others, and get away with it.
- Because he was a Pharisee.  
Because he was the man about town.  
Because he wore the right clothes, and knew how to behave in the temple.  
Because it was unlikely that he would be challenged among his peers.

But that is not the end of the story.

- It was not the first time the tax collector had entered the temple.
- It was not the first time the tax collector had been centered out for scorn and ridicule.
- It was, just one more insult to add to the weight upon his shoulders.

And yet, the tax collector remained. The tax collector remained in that quiet holy place, where he struggled to lift his eyes to the heavens. And I wonder why he stayed. If he was to be ridiculed in the temple, as on the streets or in the local pub, then why stay? Why return?

Because even with its problems, and with its problem people, in the temple:

- There was refuge.
- There was space to breathe.
- There was quiet to think.
- There was an invitation to dream.
- There was a place to pray, perhaps with words, perhaps only in the heart
- There was One who understood, and lifted the burdens of life, ever so slightly for a while.

o Our church desperately needs people to serve it and represent it out there in the world, and to be proud of the steps forward

and the things accomplished for the great good of humanity; not proud as in "Look what I did," but proud as in "Well done, good and faithful servant."

o Our church needs to be filled with prayerful people, who attend, not because your pew would be lonely without you, but because you want to be here and you want to be part of His Master Plan.

o Our church needs to be a safe place and refuge for those who are stumbling, struggling, and striving for something more, even if they don't know yet, what the 'more' is.

It is said that pride is the greatest sin.

So leave your pride at the door, every door you enter. For you will always be able to find those you believe to be greater than yourself, and those you believe you are better than, if you really want to look at things that way. But not here.

Leave your pride at the door. Come into this place, with a humble heart.

Pray earnestly, and honestly. Serve faithfully and constantly.

*For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great. (V14, GNT)*

Amen.