



“The Great Reversal”

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, October 22 and 23, 2016
The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Luke 18:9–14; 2Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus once again takes the perceived ideal of what the correct answer should be, turns it upside down, shakes it around, and smacks it out into a pile of donkey dung.

Our lesson starts off sounding like a joke. Two men, he says, go up to the temple to pray. Number one: this is the guy whom we (or at least the original audience) would assume to be the guy we’re going to root for. He’s a Pharisee, so that means he’s a teacher, and he believes in the resurrection. He fasts twice a week. He tithes. Most importantly, he is **NOT** a tax collector.

Guy number two (perhaps appropriately): he’s a tax collector. Which, for us twenty-first century North Americans, needs a bit of an explanation. Because we hear “tax collector” and we think IRS, or April 15 (or quarterlies, if you’re designated “self-employed” and don’t have a treasurer to send in payroll).

What us Twenty-first Century North Americans need to realize is that a tax collector, first, stands a strong chance of being a non-native. So, there’s a strike right there.

If he **was** a native, then he wasn’t liked at all, because he was working in close relationship with the occupying army, which definitely puts him on the wrong side of his own people. He’s working **for** the occupiers, **against** his own.

His job is to *collect taxes*. The government gives him a set amount of money that he is expected to turn over, it’s up to him, for the most part, to figure out how to get those funds. Anything he gets above and beyond that amount is his to keep. For the most part, the Romans will turn a blind eye as to *how* he collects and *how much* he collects, so long as he turns in the amount they tell him to. So, a tax collector is rather arbitrarily strong arming the people into paying for protection, only he’s not providing any protection.

The first guy, the Pharisee, reminds God what a great guy he is. He’s popular. He’s always the first one chosen on the school yard. He is *absolutely* one of the cool kids. And he is *So Very Pleased* that he is not like that cheating vermin of a human being, that Tax Collector.

Of course, God, you’re going to bless me and all that I do, because I’ve got the

correct pedigree, I do all the right things, I've got the proper skin color, I am theologically right, and, of course, Lord, I am male.

That other guy, the Tax Collector, *knows* he's a pile of donkey excrement. He *understands* that no one on the playground wants to choose him for their team. He's probably *never* been one of the cool kids. And even though he has the dinari, and can afford the nice stuff (more so probably than that Pharisee), ain't none of the locals gonna want his largess, because it stinks with the stink of Rome, and betrayal.

Some days, life sucks, and then you die.

But, and this is where things get theologically tricky, Jesus says it's the scummy guy in the expensive clothes that gets God's attention, and *not* the self-righteous Pharisee making the grandiose claims.

I don't know if this has happened to you: I tend to get too wrapped up in TV shows, to the point where Marianne will often say to me

You know they're not real, right?

Because, of course, the lead character will do something stupid, and I'll yell at them, on screen, like they can hear me.

Or, as has happened on more than one occasion, the villain will do yet another thing to thwart the main character, and I will wonder aloud,

Why doesn't someone just kill that character?

And then, an episode or so later, that same character that I wanted *dead* will do something *good*, almost even heroic, and then all of the seemingly evil, awful, dastardly things that individual has done over the course of the show I suddenly see in a new light, so that I'm able to say

Ah, so now I see why they did that thing that got me so angered, not because they are a selfish jerk, but because they were trying to protect some planetary secret. A secret that, had it come to light, would have spelled genocide.

Okay, so I watch too much science fiction, but I think you get the gist of what I'm striving to say: Redemption is possible. Forgiveness is attainable. NOT that we can do so ourselves. But rather, that Christ Jesus gives it to us, freely and without cost.

So, to get back to our two guys praying in the temple. Yes: tithing is good. Being kind to those around us is a positive thing. Praying, too, regularly and frequently, is something we should all aspire to. Fast, even, if you want to and are doing so for the right reasons, which is to say, if you're fasting to bring you closer to God, and *not* to show off.

Remember, however, that *doing* those things does not earn us God's love. *Doing* those things do **not**, in and of themselves, make us a believer.

We are, each of us, **all** of us, sinners at heart. We will, each of us and all of us, mess up our relationships with God, with our family, with our neighbors, with our co-workers, to the point of being irreparable. And when I do that, that's when God steps in, slaps me up alongside the head and says,

Look, Brock, stop being stupid.

I think that's part of what Paul was trying to tell Timothy as well. People mess up. People make mistakes. We can forgive one another, or not, that's up to us. What is **Not** up to us is whether God forgives us, and others. Because God **Does** forgive us. God forgives us regardless if we *deserve* that forgiveness. God forgives us regardless if we want that *other* person to be forgiven.

We are, all of us, **both** the Pharisee AND the Tax Collector, loved and hated by others; loved and hated by self. But loved, forever and always, by God.

Amen.

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