

Where do we go from here?

Pentecost 23C/Anniversary Sunday—October 23, 2016

[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]

Jesus told the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else.

Two people went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer, "I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous, like the rest of humankind, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on all I get."

The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to look up to heaven, but in humility said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

This one, I tell you, went home again at rights with God; the other did not. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

—Gospel of Luke

[Play song "You Must Love Me" by Madonna]

She was born into a country and into a lifestyle that was poor and precarious. In order to survive, she became a model—a fashion model. It is said that some of those photos were ... well, you know what I am talking about. You know what I am talking about. Her life was all about to change when she caught the eye of a man with wealth and power who had a desire to become president, although she was reluctant to get involved with this man. That man was much older than she. He was persistent. A short time after their meeting, the two were married.

The story of this woman, her biography or resume, has been pointed out by many to be more embellishment than fact.

Let me just check in with you. You know who I am talking about, don't you? You know. Her name is...

Maria Eva Duarte, in Los Toldos, Argentina.

How many of you thought I was talking about Melanija Knavs? It is easy to get confused; both women caught the eye of rich and powerful men. Melanija Knavs is better known as Melania Trump, the wife of Donald J. Trump. Maria Duarte is known as Eva Peron, the wife of Argentine President Juan Peron. She was affectionately known as Evita.

The song you just heard is a snippet from the film version of the Broadway play, Evita. That was Madonna singing...

*Where do we go from here?
This isn't where we intended to be
We had it all, you believed in me
I believed in you
Certainties disappear
What do we do for our dream to survive?
How do we keep all our passions alive?*

The song comes in the movie when, unbeknownst to Evita, the world of power, the world of wealth, the world of adulation and adoration is about to collapse.

Mythology—the stories we tell over and over again to teach a lesson or to expound on thought and experience—is often greatly disconnected from reality.

Around Eva Peron are great stories of her benevolent charitable actions. Eva and Juan Carlos crafted a mythology, created a story that they were one with the people, one with the *descamisados*, the “shirtless ones”. The shirtless ones were the poor, low-income and working class Argentineans.

That made for great storytelling and even beatific myths surrounding Evita.

Closer to the truth of that time is that Eva and Juan Carlos Peron were rich, powerful people who calculated, brokered and executed actions in order to hold onto power. Truth and fiction were blurred and little changed for those who were being crushed under poverty.

Where do we go from here?

Bob Marley once said that “The greatness of a person is not in how much wealth they acquire, but in their integrity and their ability to affect those around them positively.”

Let's look at some more stories. Today's gospel comes from the late first century storyteller we call Luke.

The scene is set: Jesus is telling a story, a teaching story called a parable.

You just heard me read it a couple of minutes ago. Did you catch the utterly terrifying radical teaching of change?

It is OK if you didn't. Many people who grew up in the Christian Church have been told that the Pharisee was bad and the tax collector was ... was better, at least in comparison to the Pharisee.

I want you to consider this. Those early listeners would have been startled by the parable. The scene is set: two people went up to the temple to pray. One is a part of a group who wants to gain and maintain control of the temple. Why? Because having control gave them wealth, power and prestige.

The other was a tax collector. A better description is that the other was a toll collector. Toll collectors, among other duties, collected tolls. They collected taxes. In order to go from point A to point B, you would be stopped and told that you had to pay this fee and that fee and—oh, another fee and a new fee.

If you had been living in Toronto 150 years ago and you wanted to travel down Yonge Street, you would be stopped just north of Bloor and again at Dundas where toll gates were established. These were private roads and you were expected to pay.

The prized toll gate (“prized” meaning the most lucrative) was the road toll on Davenport Road. The next time you are driving on Davenport Road near Bathurst Street, look for the small building sitting on the northwest corner. That was the gatekeeper’s shelter. You did not get to proceed without paying the tolls.

Whether I am talking about 150 years ago or in the first century, tollkeepers were not well thought of. You, as a traveller, would try anything and everything to avoid the tollkeeper.

When Jesus talks about the tollkeeper, the listener understood that he was talking about an outsider, a despised outsider. To put this into first-century religious terms, the tollkeeper was unclean—a sinner—and was to be avoided at all cost.

Now to get to the juicy bits. The tollkeeper was despised and unclean, just as much as the Pharisee. The tollkeeper was in the temple or, at least, at the temple. Early first-century temple culture was controlled by a brokered religion.

In order to go deeper and make connection, understand that a brokered religion is a religion that separates and is controlled by priestly mediators. Those mediators, those religious leaders were the necessary link—the only link—between God and the people.

Not only is the tollkeeper despised, so is the Pharisee. The Pharisee is a huge component of the brokered religion around the temple.

I just said this a few minutes ago; hear it again, this time not about Peron or Trump but of this religious group called Pharisees. They were rich, powerful people who calculated and executed actions in order to hold onto power. Truth and fiction were blurred and little changed for those who were being crushed under poverty.

It gets juicier ... this story gets terrifyingly radical. If you are wondering “where do we go from here”, focus on the story. Hear the radical message. Jesus through Luke is turning everything upside down in the temple. *Jesus turns everything upside down.*

The toll collector—the sinner—does what?

*The toll collector stood some distance away,
not daring even to look up to heaven, but in humility said,
“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*

God be merciful to me, a tollkeeper.

This story is a radical teaching because Luke is telling their listener that “He,” the outsider, refused to accept the limitations imposed on him by the religious pure. He never rebuts the

Pharisee's shaming nor his efforts to reinforce the status quo, *but [he] speaks directly to God, seeking mercy. He breaks through the intimidation and fear that the Pharisee's words [prayer] have created, and by his actions, challenges the Pharisee's reading of God's judgments... He claims God's ear for himself*¹. [Herzog II, W. R., *PARABLES AS SUBVERSIVE SPEECH. JESUS AS PEDAGOGUE OF THE OPPRESSED*, 1994]

So why would Luke create this story? Luke is teaching something to a community of followers of Jesus back then and there.

I think the message is pertinent to our here and now, to what is next and where do we go from here.

God is listening and speaking outside official channels! The unclean, unacceptable outsider prays directly to God and simply says, "Include me." The toll collector prays: "God, include me. Make atonement for me. Be one with me."

This is radical!

What Jesus is saying through Luke is that all brokered religion is at an end. Catch the power of that thought. *All brokered religion is at an end.* The status quo is no more.

Jesus had a powerful regard for toll collectors and everyone else who were outside of the social and religious boundaries of others.

Luke is teaching that God's domain has no brokers. Everyone, that is you, that is me, has direct access to the Holy. When we pray we are our own brokers.

Taking all this to its logical end: "A brokered religion, a church of rules and regulations that divides people into us and them—insider, outsider, sinner and saved—produces a cyclical understanding of the faithful life. In addition, a brokered religion tends to produce a passive relation to the Christian life ... [a] passivity carried over into the social, economic, and political realms as well. Where the rich get richer and the poorer are crushed."²

As a congregation, many are wondering about 'Where do we go from here?' It is the anniversary of this church building. Then and there, the congregation had to remember their past and move—literally move and step into what was next.

Who do you want to be in today's story? You do realize that you are now all outsiders, don't you?

Belonging to a congregation, committing to a sacred practice of Christianity, is not the status quo in our society. As each year passes, we are becoming more and more outside of the norm.

That is scary. Like Eva Peron (or probably even like Melania Trump), we also have a desire to keep the familiar, the established, the power, the prestige and the money. But that is not the gospel message. That is not the way of the Christ.

¹ Herzog II, W. R. Parables as Subversive Speech. Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed. Louisville. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.

² Adapted from Funk, R. W. A Credible Jesus. Fragments of a Vision. Santa Rosa. Polebridge Press, 2002.

Hear the Bob Marley words again, but in the second person: *'The greatness of you is not in how much wealth you acquire, but in your integrity and your ability to affect those around you positively.'*

Let me make this about us. The greatness of this church Kimbourne Park, this denomination the United Church of Canada, of you and I is not in how much wealth, money or property we acquire or hold onto. Our greatness as individuals and as a community of Christians is measured by our integrity and our ability to affect, truly and contextually affect those around us positively.

Where do we go from here? We step forward again and again, not holding onto what we have but using what we acquired to create positive change outside of this building of brick and mortar.

People are hungry. Use what you have to bring about radical change to impact others.

People are lonely. Use what you have experienced to bring about radical inclusion that engages others.

People are scared. Use what you can do to bring about radical hope that supports and encourages others.

Become a church whose sole mission is to embrace 'working together feeding people's mind, body and soul'. That is a powerful mission. This is an engaging ministry.

Where do we go from here? Step into this future and celebrate because this is good news indeed.