

Sermon on Sunday 26 October 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Gospel reading: Luke 18. 9-14

Redeeming Twists

One sign of a great movie is the plot twist you didn't see coming. In my humble opinion, one of the all-time greatest twists has got to be *The Usual Suspects*. Spoiler alert! Close your ears if you've yet to and want to see it. Turns out the meek, low-level conman Verbal Kint is none other than the terrifying and mysterious criminal mastermind, Keyser Soze, who everyone has been chasing throughout the film.

For *its* first audience, this parable of Jesus today would have had an equally jaw-dropping twist. It's a story about two men; one the most respected in society, and the other, the least. The Pharisee is the good guy. He's part of an upstanding religious group of devoted, devout and law-abiding Jews. The tax collector, on the other hand, is as shady as they come; a 'lowlife' collaborator with the hated Roman occupation, who overtaxed and took a cut, profiteering from the misery of others. If you could choose one group of people to cancel in first-century Palestine, it would be tax collectors.

So, when Jesus brings them both to the temple to pray, the crowds are expecting the tax collector to be ridiculed. He starts with the Pharisee. Instead of praying to God, this Pharisee prays to himself and anyone who will listen by broadcasting his virtues. And it's completely OTT. 'I fast twice weekly,' he declares. Now, even for the most devout Jew, fasting would have been a once or

twice a year thing, tops. The listeners would have found this amusing, on tenterhooks to see how Jesus would further humiliate the taxman. Instead, Jesus' tax collector is an unexpected antihero. In contrast to the self-righteous, self-congratulatory Pharisee, the tax collector can't even look up to heaven. He beats his breast and he prays, 'Have mercy on me, God, I'm a sinner'. He displays a humility and a self-knowledge and a profound need for mercy. He doesn't actually say anything about changing, but, nevertheless, 'This is the man,' says Jesus, 'who went home justified before God'.

Mic drop.

Someone once said that 'There is no manipulation in God's love. That's why Jesus told parables – so we can see ourselves from a distance'.

These stories invite us to ask ourselves, 'Where am I in this parable?'.

So, do you spot yourself in this one?

I'll hold my hand up and say that I can be as self-righteous and arrogant as the next person. And, likewise, occasionally there are times when I feel brought to my knees with a crushing sense of guilt and my own need for mercy.

But I think the thing I relate to most is what's sometimes called 'othering'; that practice of judging and scapegoating another. The Pharisee is quick to say, 'I'm not like *him*, thanks God!'. And often that's how we humans define ourselves; 'We're not like *them*', whichever 'them' it might be.

The Pharisee is easy not to like. And, actually, that throws us into a similarly arrogant place; 'I'm not like *him*, thank God!'

We can call this the sin or curse of comparison, which usually comes from a place of insecurity or resentment or fear. We're living in, I fear, an epidemic of 'othering'. And the victims are most obviously immigrants (the vast majority of whom are here legally and pay into the system, or students paying through their noses to study). Tragically, trans people are also targets. I happen to think that Jesus would have hung out with both groups.

We're told that Jesus' parable was aimed at those who believed they could be righteous before God through their own efforts. And, sadly, many people think of Christians as being smug and self-righteous like the Pharisee. It's certainly true that Christianity without humility, honesty and mercy can be pretty obnoxious.

The Pharisee and the tax collector went to the temple to pray. Elsewhere, Jesus says, before you do that, first make things right with anyone you've wronged or who's wronged you. If we are to seek mercy, we must live mercy. That's why we have this thing we call the Peace in our services. Make peace before you come to receive the mercy held in bread and wine. And this is where religion gets tough and costly, because it often means swallowing pride or letting go of our need for an apology; it means reaching out with no guarantee of reconciliation.

But, and it's a big one, God makes us a promise. And it's beautifully summed up in a line from our first reading; 'I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten'. The locusts are those things in our lives which have devoured or devastated us. God promises to repay, to redeem all the hurt and all the shame and

all the damage. But we can only heal as much as we can own. The Pharisee was unwilling or unable to bring his damage, and so he left still carrying it. The tax collector spilled his damage out honestly and vulnerably, and he left it there.

A few months ago, I swallowed some pride and wrote to someone I'd wronged a long time ago and who I believe had wronged me. One or two people I confided in advised against it, knowing how easily I get hurt. But the conviction was strong and I knew it was the right thing. The response wasn't what I'd hoped for, and it was clear that a relationship at this time isn't possible. I don't tell you this to be self-congratulatory like the Pharisee (I hope!). I share it because, regardless of what happened, I did what I knew was right and I left my hurt there, and now, actually, I'm free from that particular guilt that followed me around for years.

As I've been talking, maybe it's surfaced one or two things for you. If so, let's take an honest moment to ask ourselves, 'What now?'. Is there something I can lay down and leave here, in this 'temple', today?

The plot of our lives doesn't have to be dictated by our past, because God is in the business of repaying what the locusts have eaten, of rewriting redeeming twists. Amen

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