

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, October 23, 2022
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
“‘To Tithe or Not to Tithe’: That Is [Not] the Question”
Second of four in a sermon series entitled
“From Bread to Cup to Faith and Giving”
Christian Scripture: Luke 18:9-14



Last week, during the first service of our series we focused on ‘bread’. This week we focus on the ‘cup’. We are moving toward ‘faith’ and ‘giving’ – as our sermon series states. One of the most important things to realize when interpreting the scriptures is that almost everything heard therein is symbolic, or metaphoric. This makes sense because the scriptures attempt to describe that which is transcendent – God! And God is so extraordinary, so ungraspable, and so indescribable that humans (Jesus included) are forced to resort to words and

stories that 'point to' that which they want to say about God and our relationship with God. All that tries to approximate God in the Bible ought not necessarily be interpreted or understood literally. Most of the scriptures were not intended to be taken literally. If the Bible was interpreted too literally, or terrestrially, or temporally, then nothing would approximate the transcendent.

For example, the cup (or chalice). The cup is symbolic of what? Wine. Wine is symbolic of what? Blood. Blood is symbolic of what? Well, blood could be symbolic of sacrifice. And blood could be symbolic of life itself. And we can go deeper still! Blood can be symbolic of 'The Source'. The source of what? The source of righteousness and thus the source of salvation. [Or, the source of Creation. Or the source of everything for that matter!¹]

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we are presented with two characters. There are many ways to interpret the 'meaningfulness' of the two

¹ Our friend, and Muslim scholar, Amer Latif made a beautiful point about 'all coming from God'. I so wished to quote Dr. Latif in my message, but we did not have time.

"What Shams does is first of all he makes a distinction between the created and the uncreated. If we as human beings think of God, think of the reality that has given birth to Creation-- this even works at the physical level, I think, even as the idea of the Big Bang. Everything after the Big Bang is creation. How can something that's in creation go beyond creation? How can we get beyond that initial moment of creation, that's where the source is, that's where the Creator is? So this is one of the problems one of the questions and there's different solutions to it of course. And the theistic solution in a monotheistic context especially is that you can't really do it yourself, God does it for you. And in the Christian tradition you know God becomes man and hence comes down, rather than the human going up, in order to pull you back-up. And in the case of Islam God reveals His word, the Quran, from that side to this side as a way to connect the created and the uncreated."

Amer Latif, "In Praise of Nothingness", Centre Congregational Church, July 17, 2022.

characters. Let me propose to you that one character, the Pharisee, saw the Source of Righteousness, and thus the source of salvation, to be *himself*. The parable states so right from the start. “To some who were confident of their own righteousness” Jesus compared to a Pharisee. You see, the Pharisee understood that he was righteous because he was superficially ‘honest’ and ‘faithful’ and because he tithed that which he earned to God. The Source of his Salvation was himself and he itemized his good deeds as justification.

In contrast, Jesus described another man, a tax collector, who understood God as the only source of his righteousness and salvation, not himself. If you remember, the tax collector pled, “God, have mercy on me”. Clearly, the tax collector believed all the power, the entire source of salvation, came from and thus was given by God alone.

In two weeks, the Reverend Roger Brown will celebrate Holy Communion with you. Roger will remind you of how Jesus took the cup after supper and shared it with the disciples, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 25:27-28). On that night, Jesus said, “The Source of Righteousness, the source of salvation, the source of life, comes from this cup, this wine, this blood. That is, it comes through me, Jesus; it comes from God alone!”

Why did Jesus declare this understanding a 'new' covenant? The old covenant said that the source of life came from me (by what I did), from you (by what you did), from the Pharisee, and from the tax collector (by what they did). The old covenant understood that if you obeyed the Ten Commandments, you would be righteous. If you obeyed the Law, you would be saved. If you sacrifice animals, blood, at the temple, you would receive life. If you tithe, you will earn God's love and affection and thus be in right relationship with God. This is precisely what the Pharisee understood. Yet, Jesus declared a new covenant and proclaimed that it is God and God alone (represented by Jesus, symbolized as blood, wine, and the cup) that supplies righteousness and salvation.

Believe me, while we are in the midst of this stewardship season wherein I advocate that we all tithe a portion of our income to Centre Church, I see the profound irony in reading a scripture that uses a man who tithes as a *bad* example. But, if we examine this parable not from the perspective of 'who tithes and who does not', but rather from the perspective of 'who understands the source of righteousness comes from himself' and 'who understands the source of righteousness comes from God' then we will more accurately interpret the parable.

So, here I conclude. If the source of righteousness comes from God alone, then our inclination, our wish, our desire, our intention to tithe, to give to the church, comes from God and not from ourselves. If during these four weeks, you find yourself thinking and praying that you desire to tithe – that desire comes from God, not from you – and for that you should rejoice and respond accordingly. If you find yourself yearning to feed our community through Loaves & Fishes, then rejoice and respond accordingly because God is acting through you! If you feel that you love, that you have a warmth for, your neighbor, that is no credit to you. Credit is due to God for instilling God’s spirit of love within you! If you desire that the gospel is preached in our church, then thank God, not yourself, for your ability to hear, recognize, and desire to communicate the gospel to the ends of the world.² You see, what is crucial is ‘from whom do you understand your salvation derives? From you or God?’

You know, my sermon title this morning is all wrong! The question should NOT be ‘to tithe or not to tithe’ because the Pharisee tithed and Jesus used him as a bad example. The determinative question really should be, “Am I or is God the Source of Righteousness?!” The tax collector understood that God, God’s mercy,

² While it may be true that the Pharisee ‘thanked God’ that he was not like the sinners, I would argue that precisely because the Pharisee “looked down on everyone else” (Luke 18:9-9) that the Pharisee did not understand God to be the source of his righteousness. On the contrary, the Pharisee elevated himself thus seeing himself ‘above’ and better than others because of his good deeds.

and God's love was the sole source of his salvation. It is the cup, the wine, the blood, it is Jesus, it is God, that is the only source of life abundant and life eternal and this the tax collector understood.

Friends, when we offer our pledges to the church on November 13, on Stewardship and Pledge Sunday, let us credit God, and *only* God, and *not* ourselves, for instilling within us a desire to serve God, to praise God, to honor God by tithing. When we tithe, it will not be *our* doing. It will be God's doing through us.³ The old hymn declares, "To God be the Glory, Great Things He Hath Done". And God will have done a great thing by giving us all a spirit of humility, sacrifice, and generosity through the giving of our tithes to God's work and will in the world.

³ Dr. Amer Latif made the same point to us, although far more eloquently and clearly than I have.

"Notice the similarity here with what Shams said: when you bring your nothingness to God, then something comes from God and that is love and that lifts you up; it is God's work ultimately, not our work, God's working through us. *And they love him* which is the Quranic verse is a trace of *He loves them*. This brings us to a really important insight of these contemplative traditions where while acknowledging the importance of a cause and effect causality at the level of our physical world outside, where you know if you need to cook food you have to do the shopping; if you push something it moves, if I need something I feel the desire arising in me then I go and get that thing, so my desire precedes the thing that I go to. But from this perspective of unity but Shams is talking about and what Jesus is saying 'for you it is impossible but for God it is possible', the fact that a human being starts to love God is in fact God loving you; causality collapses, there this is a change in perception that rather than saying 'oh I have this idea that I must serve God' that is a moment these saints, these contemplatives say: 'give thanks that God is thinking of you. That you could have that thought is a proof of God's love for you.' This doesn't mean you don't do the work that you feel called to do but at the same time you don't fall into the trap of thinking that God is somewhere out there and I'm going to get to God. That's the biggest trap that the contemplatives the mystics really want us to be aware of, not to use the logic of the outside, apparent physical world, not to use the logic of history to think about our relationship with God."

Amer Latif, "In Praise of Nothingness", Centre Congregational Church, July 17, 2022.

This is the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".