"Life in the Flatlands"

Cheryl Fields Tyler

Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
October 28, 2007

Luke 18:9-14

The early church was a very ambitious experiment in pluralism. During Jesus' life, he amassed quite a following—as we know, so much so that the religious and political elite became so worried about just how he wanted to use his very abundant, and very evident, power over the masses that they conspired and succeeded in assassinating him. Part of what they found threatening about him was his appeal to so many different types of people. Unlike the other messianic figures that roved Galilee, more or less as contemporaries of his, Jesus was distinct in his ability to draw followers from across many different strata of society—from rich folks to poor, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, well and sick, educated (what we'd call today "white collar") professionals and the working class, society's favored and society's rejects.

Imagine the surprise that grew like the tide in the first decades after Jesus' death when folks started to realize how, rather than the movement Jesus started "petering out" as they'd hope, Peter and the other disciples didn't go back to their day jobs but became leaders in a movement that exploded in numbers and grew exponentially, year by year. What started in Galilee moved to Galatia, Colossus, Macedonia, Egypt, even Rome. Within a few decades—lightening speed in the ancient world without telecommunications and easy transportation—Christians were so numerous and their numbers growing so rapidly that the Roman and Jewish authorities persecuted Christians viciously. There are even accounts of Christian missionaries in China that date to about 65 A.D. Christianity was catching on like "wildfire" as the old saying goes—and this week we can see both the awesome power of that phase but also the terror it can evoke in those that have something to lose in the conflagration. In this case, the political leaders were living in the big house at the top of tinderbox and their fear led to all kinds of desperate acts of cruelty. Lest we forget, all but one of the disciples were assassinated or given the death penalty for trumped up crimes, and early church leaders like Paul were in and out of jail or beaten up, and most were murdered by the state.

What evoked such violent retribution was that the early Jesus followers kept Jesus' identity and core message vividly alive—everyone had a seat at Christ's table, everyone shared in the wine of forgiveness and the bread of grace, there was no price of admission, no socio-political boundaries, no hierarchy of religious elite, no arcane rules to keep "certain types" out of the fold, no caste or class system keeping the great masses in their ordered segregation. You could go to a house church in Ephesus and find this great multiplicity of people working and learning together—from every race, religion, tribe, CEO's to janitors, society mavens to harlots, the "soccer moms" with the untouchables—all would be there, and most frustratingly, when those Christians got together, it was hard for the officials to tell who was who. They didn't know how to control this kind of movement—after all, how would you control a movement built on compassion, love, and joy?

But of course, lest we be caught up in a utopian fantasy, we need to remember that the early Christians were human—and so while they might be on their best behavior when the Roman official came to visit their house church in Ephesus, scratch the surface and the usual dynamics that characterize all human groups were there. Some people would start to talk about these other folks who did thus-and-such and, well, didn't they know that this just wasn't done, and shouldn't somebody set them straight?

So this is the early church context in which Luke is writing his gospel. As I mentioned several weeks ago when we talked about the "Good Samaritan" passage from this Gospel, like all of the New Testament gospels, Luke was written a good many years after Jesus' life and ministry. It is written in the Greek of the larger Gentile world, not in Aramaic, the local version of Hebrew that Jesus spoke, so the audience—like all the Gospels, is this larger and growing community of Christians outside of the Jewish enclave where Jesus spent his earthly ministry.

The author of this Gospel is writing fairly late in the first century or early in the second—that is somewhere between 50-80 years after Jesus' life and crucifixion and the birth of the church in the Easter story. He says explicitly that his purpose is to glean from all the stories floating around in the oral tradition of the early church—stories that came from both eye witnesses and others—and set down an "orderly account" of Jesus' life and ministry that will be persuasive about the meaning, purpose and context of Jesus' life and ministry and the meaning of that to the church. He adds to his "orderly account" of Jesus' life and ministry his likewise orderly account of the birth and rapid growth of the early church in the book of Acts. Clearly, he is writing with purpose—while both Luke and Acts read like chronologies, these are not some random diary or day-in-the life accounts. He recounts history, but he does so with a theological and ecclesiastical purpose.

Jesus' status, as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and the initiator of the New Covenant that Arlene spoke about last week, is not only clear to this author, but affirming Jesus' status as both Jewish Messiah and making absolutely clear that the gospel is not just for Jews is the clear underlying plot line that pulses throughout the

gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The author of Luke and Acts is clearly a Jew—and one with advanced knowledge and understanding of Jewish law, prophecy, and society, at that.

But he is also clearly a citizen of a larger context, showing throughout his writing that he is steeped in the popular Greek culture, history, and tradition of his day. Luke and Acts together are written in the style of the historical novels at that time, in beautifully constructed Greek with a literary sophistication that would have appealed much more to a learned Gentile audience than a Jewish one. As he selects, edits, and stitches together a narrative based on the myriad of stories floating around the early church, he interprets and adds his own commentary. He is clearly writing for a broad audience of second and third and even fourth generation Christians, a population that was made up of Gentiles and not-particularly-religious, “away from Jerusalem” Jews who were, in this author’s mind, in need of a broad understanding of Jesus as both a fulfillment of the “Old Covenant” that established Judaism and the initiator of a “New Covenant” that makes the old one obsolete.

In this story, we see Luke addressing the early Christians who were exhibiting the natural tendencies we humans share with the animal kingdom—namely, establishing hierarchy. We call it lots of things—the pecking order, the “in group,” the “top dogs.” No matter what you call it, it is about humans taking on the power to judge, to decide who’s in and who’s out and in what order. In selecting this story from Jesus’ ministry—and by the way, this little vignette is only found in Luke and not in the other Gospels—the author is telling us that, just like when Jesus was doing his work on the dusty streets of Galilee, there were some folks in the early church who were, in the words of the story, “trusting in themselves that they were righteous and regarding others with contempt.”

Hear again the story that Jesus told: Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee—a very religious man, who lived his life by the rules and regulations of the covenant. He fasted when he was supposed to; he gave away the percentage of his income as the Jewish law dictated. What he wore, what he ate, who he was married to, what work he did—all was in line with his community’s definition of what it took to be deemed a righteous man. He worked hard at righteousness. And it wasn’t easy being one of the chosen ones—it took work, dedication, attention to detail, not giving in to baser emotion. He stood in the temple praying, filled with thankfulness over his chosen state, having just walked in from the dirty street with its random chaos and unwashed masses. And as he prays, he notices one of the “unwashed” was over in the back of the temple clearly in some agony over some thing, and he says thank you. Thank you God that I’m not like that guy over there—or any of the other thieves, rogues, and adulterers that damage society, endanger our children, and undermine our religious values.

And the righteous listening to the story nod in agreement. Yes, how true. We are so lucky to have the means of righteousness within our control, to have been given the special gift of knowledge and discernment and above all, the law that, while exacting in

its expectations, gives us a clear roadmap of the high-way to righteousness. Thanks be to God that I am not like those others, with their do-what-we-have-to-to-get by relativism. I mean how hard is it, after all, to be good?

And then Jesus points to the guy in the back of the room with the unofficial but unmistakable "look" of a tax collector—decent enough clothes yes, but just look a little closer at the dusty shoes, tattered hem, weathered leather satchel stuffed with tax receipts and undoubtedly shoddy record-keeping and not a few quid-pro-quo bribes. See him? Head down, racked with tears, beating his chest, praying—no the right word would be begging for mercy with sobs and unintelligible phrases. Saying something about how ashamed he is of himself, that he's a "sinner," that he's throwing himself on God's mercy. Can't you just see the little "thought bubble" above the heads of the righteous in the story… "Oh, Lord—do these people have no dignity? Too much information!! It's one thing to choose that line work, but my God man. Straighten up, get a hold of yourself. Look where you are. You are in the Temple, for God's sake. Don't you have any pride?"

And then Jesus does that "Jesus thing" again, and turns the story from an interesting little gossipy tid-bit into a mirror on the soul.

He says to those trusting in themselves that they are righteous and holding others in contempt, that it's the tax collector not the Pharisee that went home that day the better man. The moral of the story? Those who puff themselves up and place themselves above others will be "humbled", and those who are "humbled" will be lifted up.

As it turns out, the word "humbled" in some ways obscures the meaning here. When I think of someone being "humbled," it has a connotation of embarrassment, of something that happens to you that makes you feel ashamed or worse. We don't generally use the work humiliate when we talk about the best way to build character. And when we do use the word humble as a positive attribute, it only keeps its positive connotation when it's ascribed by another—not as a self-description. It works in the English language this way: I say to you, "You are humble" —but if I say I'm humble, or I'm trying to humble myself, if you're like most people, you immediate suspect I'm doing just the opposite. So what are we to do with this story that rings so true, but has a moral that seems hard to know how to put into practice?

This is one of those times that going back to the original Greek is really helpful. The word in Greek that Luke uses here that we translate in to the word humble is "tapienoo"—which literally means to level out, like a hill that is leveled to a plain, or a ravine that is filled in to be level with the field around it. Listen to the moral of the story again, with this more literal and figurative translation:

> Those who see themselves as somehow "above others" will be brought down to ground level, and those who see themselves as somehow "below others" will be brought up to the same level as everyone else.

As Jesus said to his followers and Luke reminded the early Christians, Jesus calls us to life in the flatlands. In the new covenant, there is no select group that gets the chosen status, the mountaintop house while the others toil outside God's promise, in the ravines of life. No, in the new covenant, we are on a level playing field. No one is above another. We are all equally, lavishly loved and welcomed in to the family of God.

But, to live here in this new covenant world, we have to give up our high-horse of self-righteousness, and we have to accept fully the special grace God has for those who find themselves in the dark ravine of despair. There's more than a moral "aha!" in this story—it is a promise and call to each of us to live in the flatlands of grace.

So hear again the good news, the good news that moved from the dusty streets of Galilee, that spread like wild fire on Santa Ana winds through the first-century Roman Empire to this place, this time, right now.

There is no one who is outside of God's love; no one is favored above another. God's love, when we open ourselves to it, puts our feet on the level ground where we can operate truly from a place of compassion and love—with ourselves, and with one another.

We are called to this grace—and we are called to live out of this love, this compassion, this common humanity with all people.

So where are you this morning? What are the parts of you that are trusting in your own righteousness, maybe feeling contempt? Where is the ravine of suffering, shame, and doubt in your life?

As Mark comes to lead us in the chorus *Spirit Intercede*, I invite you to linger on these questions:

What are the parts of you that are trusting in your own wisdom to get things right? Where are you feeling contempt for yourself and others? What are the parts of you that are in the ravine of suffering, shame and doubt? Are there others in your life that are in that ravine of suffering that you need to lift up?

Know as you sing this prayer that the spirit of God is here, loving us, reminding us of the good news of Jesus that is both promise of grace and imperative to live out of that promise. Here in the flatlands, there is grace for you, there is grace for me, there is grace for us. There is grace for you, there is grace for me, there is grace for all of us. May we know the healing of that grace in our lives and in our relationships.