**When things get messy…!**

A sermon by the Rev. Chris Wendell

For the 20 Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2022

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

When was the last time you got really messy? I don’t mean like, “oh, I just need to go wash my hands” messy. I mean like, “I can’t go inside until I hose myself off from head to foot” messy. Like, “covered in dirt, caked in sweat, probably bleeding from scrapes I can’t even feel” messy. Like, “pie in my face, egg on my head, shaving cream on Halloween” messy!

Can you remember ever being that messy? That covered in grime? The feeling that it would take at least 3 shampoos before you even started to feel normal again? Ok, good.

THAT’S how messy the tax-collector feels his life has become is in today’s parable. That’s how stinky, how broken, how messed-up he feels he is when he stands before God in the sanctuary and begins to pray. And he feels this way about his life because, in truth, his life is pretty broken. He’s collaborating with the Roman Empire to exploit his own people. He’s enriching himself by threatening and extorting his neighbors – in ways that are totally legal, and morally wrong. And, most likely, it’s been working for him. Or, at least, it’s been making him money. Those aren’t actually the same thing, are they?

And now something has happened. We don’t know what exactly, but his life has reached a turning point in a major way, because here he is, standing before God honestly examining his life, truly lamenting some of his choices, and beating his breast. “How did this happen? Why am I like this? What can be done?” Such honest wonderings.

Perhaps you, too, have found yourself wondering these same questions at some point in your life. Perhaps in that moment, you too wandered into God’s house, maybe even these pews on a Sunday morning with a heart full of angst. The mess of your life may have been different – I imagine most of us aren’t regularly collaborating with colonial occupiers – but the suddenly- unavoidable persistent questions of your soul may have cut similarly deep. And the feelings of confusion, defeat, and maybe even self-disgust are likely not unfamiliar. Many of us find ourselves at some point stumbling into God’s house in need of having our worthiness assured, our dignity affirmed, our belovedness renewed. Perhaps that’s you today.

In our rush to join Luke, and Jesus and everyone else in judging the relative worth of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, what we sometimes miss in this parable is the reminder that the tax collector has stumbled into the right place. Whatever crisis has happened in the tax-collector’s life to cause such a major self-evaluation, God wants to hear it. All of it. No matter what. There’s a reason the inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem and the worship space we’re sitting in right now, are both called the Sanctuary. Because they are the safe places you can go when everything else falls apart. When what looked like up, turns out to be down -- when life turns you upside down -- you can come to the Sanctuary. You can come here. You will be safe. You will be welcomed. You will be reminded of God’s forgiveness and of Love’s persistence.

It took courage for that tax-collector to go into God’s house. Though he was a Jew and this was his spiritual home, he was almost certainly told often that he wasn’t welcome there because his life was too broken. It was a lie, but he may well have come to believe it. And even on that day, when he finally worked up the strength to come into God’s house, who is in the next pew over but the person who probably told him this: the Pharisee.

The Pharisee also prays to God, but his prayer is different. Rather than telling God about his mess, he tries to convince God that everything’s just fine. I’m good. Really good, actually. And I’ve got proof that I’m fine, that I’m good. I follow the rules. I give away lots of money. I pray a lot. I don’t steal. I don’t cheat. I don’t lie. I’m good. It’s like, such a caricature that it’s tempting to think the Pharisee knows he’s just putting on a show. But I don’t think so. I think these are the honest to God prayers of his heart. He thinks it makes him look clean. But the truth is, his self-deception reveals him to be just as much of a mess as the tax-collector.

And that’s the real issue that Jesus has with the prayer of the Pharisee. It’s not that the Pharisee is bad, it’s that he isn’t well-equipped to handle the messiness of life. The only way he knows how to deal with brokenness in others is to label it, judge it, and push it away. Given the content of his own prayer, I think we can be pretty certain that he does this because, he’s not in touch with his own brokenness. And the big problem with that is that while the Pharisee sees God’s house as a place to separate himself from those he considers too messy, the tax-collector comes to find community amidst the mess. So often it is the bonds of community that help the broken become more whole, that help us sort out the messes of our lives, and slowly, with care and effort and time, find the next shape for our lives. That was the center of Jesus’ ministry on earth. That is the ministry of those who gather in his name. And that is the ministry we strive to embody here at St. Paul’s.

As you know, we are in the midst of our annual stewardship season, when we ask everyone who is part of the community to contribute to the financial well-being of our church in the coming year by making a pledge. Sometimes when organizations do these kinds of pledge drives, it feels like we’re being asked to pledge to the church of the Pharisee. Our church is great! Look how many people we have. How shiny our programs are. How perfectly we communicate (in full color brochures!). How amazing our choir. How moving our sermons. We’re fine!

But you know, the truth is, we are the church of the tax-collector. We’re messy, with parishioners whose lives are full of vibrancy and joy and celebration, and also loss and grief and brokenness and despair. Our Sunday school is full of faithfulness, spirit, and love, and some dust and a heavy rug that takes three of us to lift. Our teens love our Youth Groups, except when they conflict with lacrosse or a family trip or a nasty cold that I swear isn’t COVID. Our pageant could use a few more costumes, but we’re not hurting for angels. Our outreach partners work hard teaching English to new immigrants, training nurses and therapists in a country without a functional government, and installing insulation under trailer after trailer in Appalachia – but the work never gets finished. Our clergy visit and call and email and write – but we never make it to everyone who needs us. We keep trying to get a formal inreach committee going, but it never really happens…though somehow the casseroles find their way to the grieving, the funeral receptions are always staffed, and when there’s a new baby, there’s always a hat available.

You see – we are a church of messy people, by messy people, and for messy people. And when you pledge, you’re not pledging to an institution or an organization or a set of programs or me or even Paul Ciaccia. You’re pledging to each other. You’re pledging to the person three pews down, that as they grieve the loss of a spouse, this Church will be here for them. You’re pledging to that crying baby in the back that there will be a small alter and chalice and candle for them to light in Sunday school when they turn three. You’re pledging to a 19 year-old in Haiti that we’ll help with her tuition so she can become an occupational therapist. You’re pledging to the neighbor you see at soccer practice who you don’t realize is having a crisis of faith, that there will be a priest who wants to sit with them. You’re pledging to a newcomer who hasn’t even arrived at St Paul’s yet, that there will be a church that believes in joy and Jesus at the same time! You’re pledging to our ancestors out in the Memorial Garden who saw this church through some tough and messy years, that we will keep the faith that inspired them to build this community of welcome, comfort, challenge and strength.

You see, pledging is a promise to one another. It’s a promise to those who have come before, and to those who will come next. Most of all, it’s a promise to God, that you will do your bit to be sure there will always be a part of God’s family that knows how to respond with the love of Jesus when things get messy. Amen.