

**SURPRISED BY GRACE**  
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**Wall Street United Church, October 26<sup>th</sup> 2025**

***LUKE 18:9 -14***

A few years ago I read a book called *“Sent George and the Dragon and the Quest for the Holy Grail”*. The main character was a man called George who was sent on a quest! Just after he had set out, he encountered a dragon named Igor, who became his mentor and his guide. This is what happened when they first met:

George said, “I was growing tired. It had been a long and difficult day, and I had to move on. The dragon smiled and said to me, “Everyone on a quest needs a good companion, a faithful and trusted guide. Let me be yours. I know this forest well. Come, climb on my back!” Then the dragon made a deep bow with his scaly neck and head.

Now, it didn’t make sense, but George found himself liking this tired old dragon with his scarlet scales and great five-clawed feet. George thought he felt like a prince as he rode on the back of the dragon! From this position high on the dragon’s humped back, he noticed that the dragon’s body was covered with old wounds. Whenever the dragon breathed forth fire to light the path in front, he noticed that the wounds glowed golden red in the dark. He also noticed how the dragon limped now and again, but as it was near the end of the day, he thought that the dragon might just be tired. The old wounds however did arouse his curiosity, and so he asked about them.

The dragon replied, “O my friend, I have been slain a thousand times, but I have always risen again. These old wounds are the source of my power and my insight. Our greatest and worst enemies are not the monsters who roam the forest or even the wicked witches or evil wizards. No, it is our scars, our wounds and old injuries that we must fear. As we journey through life we have all been injured — hurt by parents, brothers or sisters, schoolmates, strangers, lovers, teachers ... the possible list of the guilty is quite long. Each wound has the power to talk to us, you know. They speak, however, with crooked voices because of the scars. But allow me to tell you a story that will make my point clear.”

George was so caught up in the words of his dragon companion that he forgot his own weariness.

“Once upon a time,” began the dragon, “A brave Samurai warrior with two great swords hanging from his belt approached a monk and said, *“Tell me, holy monk, about heaven and hell.”* The monk looked at the warrior from where he sat and replied in a quiet voice, “I cannot tell you about heaven and hell because you are much too stupid.” The samurai was filled with rage! He clenched his fists and gave a fierce shout as he reached for one of his swords. “Besides that, you are very ugly,” added the monk. The samurai’s eyes flamed, and his heart was incensed as he drew his sword.

“That” said the monk, “is hell.” Struck by the power of his words and the wisdom of this teaching, the warrior dropped his sword, bowed his head and sank to his knees. “And that” said the monk, “is heaven.”

“You see,” continued the dragon, “the words of the monk touched old wounds, perhaps wounds that were made when the warrior was a child and was called stupid, dumb or ugly. It was his wounds that caused hell to capture him. All of us have wounds — old ones and new ones — and whenever the monster appears, when hell breaks loose, we know that our old wounds are talking, guiding us. It is these wounds that must be confronted, and not us poor innocent dragons.”

“But” George said, “your wounds glow with great beauty, and you said that they are the source of your power and magic. How can my wounds become a source of power?”

“First,” replied the dragon, “you must not give in to the voice of your scars, the voice of the times you trusted and were betrayed, loved and were rejected, did your best and were laughed at. Do not give weight to the scars left because you were slighted, or made to feel less than others. Instead, when those voices call you to react with envious or jealous feelings, do exactly the opposite. When they say, “Run away!” you must stay. When they whisper, “Distance yourself,” then come all the closer. You must transform their power, not destroy it! That, my friend, is really being involved in a quest.”

Well, that was a rather long opening illustration! But when I read it, I had to highlight it and underline it immediately because it struck me as being helpful and insightful. It requires wisdom to know when it is the voice of wounds, or the voice of selfishness, or the voice of God that is speaking to us. It is not always easy to discern the difference, and we have a very peculiar way of rationalizing what we want to do.

Upon reading the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, I observed that both individuals appeared to be responding to their personal wounds. I have no way of knowing what those wounds were. I can only surmise. But it would seem to me that each of these men was driven to God by something, and each approached God in a very different way, and it was probably because of their past experiences of life that they approached God in the manner they did.

The Pharisee approached God in all the socially acceptable and prescribed ways! He adhered strictly to the letter of the law. He not only felt that he had met all the requirements of the law, but had in fact exceeded them! Fasting was not required by the law, and yet this man engaged in it twice a week as an act of self-mortification for the sins of his people, of which he felt himself not guilty. The man was honest in his business dealings, set fair prices, and gave value for value received. He was a model husband and an exemplary member of the synagogue, devout in his religious duties, and astonishingly generous in supporting the budget.

But some wound of his, I know not what, caused him to deal with God in a way that actually nullified all his good works. No one could doubt his disciplined adherence to the moral and ethical code of his faith. He is by no means a venomous villain. He is the dependable type that is the pillar of the church. But he approached God in such a way as to reduce the relationship to a mathematical formula. "I will do these things that you require of me O God, and then I will do more than what is required, and I expect you to reward me accordingly." Somewhere along the line, the Pharisee had come to believe that righteousness was a human achievement. The man was sincere in his approach to God and felt that what he was doing was the right way and the right thing to do. There is no accusation here of wrongdoing. And yet, the whole point of the parable is that *the Pharisee was in the wrong when compared to the tax collector*. The Pharisee's judgement was that he was better than the tax collector, and so was the judgement of all who heard the parable that day.

A tax collector was an object of hatred in Jesus' day because they collaborated with a foreign and dominant power to the detriment of their own people. They participated willingly in a system that was cruel and corrupt. Extortion and bribery and dishonesty were part and parcel of what they did every day, and these things were expected of them. Politically, they were viewed as traitors, and religiously they were viewed as unclean. The tax collector was the symbol of all that was despicable and reprehensible in the way of human behavior.

His very life was an offense. One can only begin to imagine the wounds that this man suffered that persuaded him to become what he was. And yet Jesus says, **“It is this man who went away from the temple that day, in the right with God.”**

Why was that? All the people listening that day to this parable would have been either blessed or shocked, surprised and delighted, or outraged at the audacity! Anyone hearing this parable would have thought that if anyone had gone home from that encounter in the right with God, it would have been the Pharisee.

The values of that day stated quite clearly that tax collectors were unacceptable in every way. And yet, Jesus reverses the values of his day to make everyone think about a new way of coming to God and a new way of thinking about the nature of God — the God of love — the God of grace!

Those who knew that they were unacceptable in every way, would have heard that story and would have taken hope and encouragement from it, and so would try again. If a tax collector could be put right with God and allowed to begin again with a clean slate, then so could everyone else who sinned, by the grace of God.

You see, the story is told as a response to the accusation that Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, and Jesus wanted to explain why he did this. This theme comes out again and again. It is the sick who are need of a physician — not those who are well. Jesus said that he came to seek and save those who are lost. Here then is a story of hope for those who had no hope, because they learned in Jesus’ proclamation that GOD SURPRISES US WITH GRACE by reversing the judgments of the world!

A little explanation of grace: Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy is *not* getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don’t deserve! And it is grace that this parable highlights.

The Pharisee was not a monster. The tax collector was not like a *‘Goldie the good-hearted hooker’* type. If they were, they each got what they deserved, and the parable is robbed of its power. Because they really were as evil as they were made out to be, the parable surprises us, and probably shocked all who heard Jesus say it!

The Pharisee was guilty of thinking that he could put God in his debt by doing all of the right things. What a small way of looking at God. That was his sin — thinking that he could control God and that he didn’t really have any need of God.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was overcome by his own unworthiness. In the Temple, in the presence of God, he cast himself on God's mercy. He opened himself to the justice of God, the mercy of God ... and was given the grace of God. In that was his redemption, and so he went away in the right.

Let me illustrate that with a more contemporary image. The believer who seeks to live the Christian life through self-effort is like the man who in an attempt to sail across the Atlantic Ocean found his boat becalmed for days. Finally, frustrated by his lack of progress, he tried to make the stalled boat move by pushing against the mast. Through strenuous efforts, he succeeded in making the boat rock back and forth and so created a few small waves on the otherwise smooth sea. Seeing the waves and feeling the rocking of the boat, he assumed he was making progress and so continued his efforts. Of course, although he exerted himself a great deal, he actually got nowhere.

So it is in the Christian life. The source of the Christian's strength lies in God's grace, not in exertions of will power or in the efforts of discipline or any other self-effort.

The difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector is the difference between law and grace. The law says, "Do this and live." It commands but gives us neither feet nor hands. Grace bids us fly ***and gives us wings!***

Jesus Christ was willingly wounded for the whole world. On the Cross at Calvary, nails were driven into his hands and feet, and a spear was thrust into his side. The thought of such wounds would cause most of us to run away, fearing the scars they would leave, if we could even contemplate such an ordeal. But Christ heard the crooked voice of the potential scars and did the opposite. They bid him flee ... and so he stayed. He took the scars upon himself so that we could be free of them.

He still takes our wounds and scars upon himself today to free us of their burden and their crooked voices. That is the good news of the Gospel of salvation, and it is the good news of the grace of God in Christ. It shouldn't come as a surprise to us because we have all heard about it before; and yet it still has that power. Everyone that I know who has experienced it has been taken by surprise.

The Pharisee thought that he could do it on his own. The tax collector knew he could not. That is how they responded to the voices of their scars.

I don't know what the scars of your wounds say to you. But whatever they say, bring them to God in faith, trusting in God's great mercy by which we have

been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. When you do that, you too will be surprised by grace! It will take your breath away, and cause you to wonder at the sheer magnificence of it.

One last word this morning: I hope that none of us will leave this place today saying, "Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee," lest the reversal be reversed!

Thanks be to God! Amen.