Mercy Topples Might

Luke 18:9-14
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
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I want to begin with a brief excursion into a topic that I *know* gets everyone super excited: Bible translations. Ok, maybe not. ☺

But even if it's not the most exciting topic in the world, it's still important for us to consider from time. This is true if for no other reason than it reminds us that the words we hear read aloud each Sunday and the words that preachers preach about each Sunday and the Bibles that we open (or not) during the week are the result of a long and laborious process, with all kinds of decisions made along the way, and all kinds of assumptions operating in the background.

I'm guessing the translation we just heard our Scripture read may have been at least a little unfamiliar to some of you.

We nearly always use either the NIV or the NRSV for public worship, but this was neither of those. It was, as Helen mentioned and as you can see in your bulletin, it was the Common English Bible (CEB) which is the translation that the forthcoming Anabaptist Bible will be using.

The people in charge of this project considered both the NRSV and the NIV, but in the end chose the CEB. Why?

I wondered this, too. The CEB hasn't been around long, only eleven years. It doesn't have the historical weight and reputation of other English translations.

Well, this week, I found out. Joani gave me a kind of published "rationale" for the choice that was provided by MennoMedia.

The goal of the CEB was a bible accessible to a broad range of people, including those for whom English may be a second language. A kind of "people's bible," you might say. Here's how they put it:

> Central to the vision of the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century was a conviction that the bible was intended to be read, interpreted, and engaged by ordinary people in the vernacular language of the day… They also believed that the meaning of scripture was not hidden or mysterious; and they rejected the idea that the bible should be accessible only to trained scholars. Since many of the annotations in the Anabaptist Bible will be contributed by lay people, we think that a translation intended for broad readability is consistent with the type of bible we are producing.[1]

Now, you may have your own opinions on this rationale. I'm sure other translations would say, well "broad readability" was our goal as well!

I know that translations evoke strong emotions in people, much like music does. Some have memorized passages in specific translations, and it expresses their heart language.

Some have strong opinions about the theological assumptions behind translations (i.e., gender inclusive language). It probably won't surprise you to learn that bible translations, like everything else in our world can be (and often is) heavily politicized.

And even beyond emotional attachments that we may have to certain verses expressed in certain ways, we may be suspicious of this whole "bible of the people, who-needs-a-scholar?" type of approach.

I get it. I happen to think quite highly of scholars and am immensely grateful for their work that makes reading easier. Sometimes the meaning of a passage actually *is* mysterious, and scholars help us guard us against false simplicity.

And I've certainly seen a lot of people flounder when told to just "go read the bible" without any kind of guidance.

But, having said *all this*, I do appreciate the thought and care that went into choosing the CEB for the Anabaptist Bible. Much as I love the poetry of some of the older translations, an important goal should always be readability.

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[1] John D. Roth, *Why We Choose the Common English Bible* (Anabaptism at 500, Issue 3, August 2022).

We must never forget that for as long as the bible has been around, ordinary non-scholars have been encountering Jesus in its pages, which is, at the end of it all, the point.

And so, I hope that we will free to use the CEB from time to time in our worship here at LMC, even as we also continue to use other translations.

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Ok, well our story this morning is one that is not difficult to understand in any translation.

It doesn't require a great deal of interpretation, at least not as far as arriving at the point of the story (translating it into our *lives* is another matter, as we'll see!).

Jesus points to two men who went up to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, an esteemed teacher of the law. The other is a tax-collector, a despised collaborator with the Roman occupiers.

The Pharisee's prayer is a loud recitation of his own merits. He helpfully itemizes his righteous deeds for God's benefit. Spiritually disciplined, morally scrupulous, generous… I'm sure he could (and would be happy to!) go on.

This prayer is a performance, not a petition.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, cannot even lift his head. He beats his breast in anguish and simply cries out for mercy, knowing full well that he is a sinner in need of grace.

This prayer is a desperate plea. There is no pretense, no moral checklist, no illusions that his merits could compel God to do anything in his favour. The tax-collector simply throws himself upon the mercy of God.

And it is the tax collector's prayer that Jesus honours. It is the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who goes home justified—"vindicated as truly righteous," as one commentator put it.

What struck me about the story this week was how Luke introduces it:

> He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with “disgust” (CEB) or “contempt” (NIV, NRSV).

Then and now, this is a common thing. We do quite easily view one another with contempt and disgust.

This week the National Post ran an article with the headline, “Canadians united in their resentments towards each other.”[2] Apparently, a new Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) poll has found that Canada’s “Resentment Index” is soaring.

The article focuses mainly on politics and the economy and grievances between provinces, but I think our resentments go far beyond this.

These last two years of pandemic have given us a window into the deep divisions between people. Increasingly, we have little capacity or interest to see anything from the perspective of those who differ from us.

This is one of the ugliest features of our cultural moment. So very many people are convinced that they are righteous and regard others with contempt.

This is true of conservatives, and it is true of progressives, and it is true of those in between. As I said last week in reference to confirmation bias, this is not a left or right thing. It is a human thing.

Well, speaking of translations, one of the ones I use least often is the King James Version. The language is often beautiful, but it can seem archaic.

But the KJV has had massive influence in the English-speaking world. And it shows up in all kinds of interesting places.

At the beginning of a rock and roll song, for example. “The Calling” is a song by a band called The Killers (who I’ve referred to before—again, don’t let the weird choice of a band name throw you off!).

The song begins with actor Woody Harrelson (who claims to be “spiritual, but not religious, and who has been quoted as saying that “Bible is just a document to control people”) reading from the King James Version of the Gospel of Matthew:

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[2] https://nationalpost.com/opinion/sabrina-maddeaux-canadians-united-in-their-resentments-towards-each-other

And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold
Many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples
And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples
Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?
But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them
They that be whole need not a physician
But they that are sick

What follows is a song about a son trying to get through to his father who's run down some dead-end roads.

They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.

There's a common thread that runs through Jesus' teachings. If you think you're healthy, you'll find contempt for the sick easy.

You'll be like that Pharisee in the temple, rehearsing your righteousness, thanking God that you're not like all those terrible people who can't get their acts together, who are wrong about so many important things.

But if you know that you're sick, unrighteous? Contempt and disgust don't come as easily.

It is the sick who are often most deeply aware of their need. And their need, like all of ours, is for what the tax collector prays for and is given.

Mercy. Forgiveness. Justification before God. Healing of the deepest and most lasting kind.

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So, this parable is an exhortation to adopt the posture of humility that is appropriate to our human condition.

It's not about beating ourselves up or trying to make ourselves seem worse than we are or tamping down healthy self-esteem. It's about acknowledging reality.

We are—each one of us—sinners in need of grace. We are—each one of us—called to extend mercy, not contempt, to our neighbours.

And let's make this real. Categories like "pharisee" and "tax collector" can easily become remote abstractions from bible land.

But if the bible is indeed to be "read, interpreted, and engaged by ordinary people," we must allow it to ask us some hard questions. So I'm going to task you (and me) some hard questions:

Who are we tempted to look down on?
Who do we chuckle condescendingly in the direction of?
Who do we define ourselves against?
Who do we knowingly roll our eyes at when we read about them in the newspaper or when we're in the safe company of those who think as we do?
Who are we tempted to thank, if not God, then our own intelligence and lofty character that we aren't like?

Contempt and disgust are strong words. But I think that each one of us has people or groups of people that we are tempted to self-righteously look down on.

"Don't do it," Jesus says. Don't travel down the easy path of self-exaltation. Don't traffic in the contempt that you see all around you.

The parable ends with these words:

> All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up (Luke 18:14).

Or perhaps more familiarly:

> All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted' (NIV, NRSV).

The challenge is to humble ourselves. But the challenge comes with a promise. And I always prefer to end with the promise rather than the wagging moral finger.

The promise is this: Those who adopt this posture of humility *will be exalted* by God.

I've already alluded to the fact that, for me, music is an important window into the deep truths of faith and the vast hope to which we are called.

It could be rock and roll or an ancient hymn or anything in between.

This week, it was a song that I've referred to in the past. Claire and a friend recorded a version of it and sang it from BC early in the pandemic.

It's a song called "Royalty" by Canadian singer/songwriter Mike Janzen. It is Luke 18:14 in the form of a song. The lowly will be lifted up by God.

It is a beautiful song with beautiful words. So, I want to end my sermon with the song. You may have seen this video before. I may even have *shown* it before (I can't always remember the contexts in which I share these things!).

The words are printed in the insert in your bulletin if you'd like to follow along. If you'd rather just watch and listen, that's fine, too.

But as we watch, I invite you to think of that tax-collector with his head bowed in the corner of the temple as you hear the verses. And to think of the objects of contempt and disgust in our own world.

Most of all, I invite us to meditate upon the hope and the truth of the God who makes this promise to lift up the humble.

Play "Royalty" (3:56)

May we be those who believe that mercy does indeed topple might. And may we not only *believe* it but *live* it. May we be sources of this mercy to those around us, particularly those we or the world are tempted to look upon with contempt.

May our hearts beat with God's.

Amen.