

Psalm 65:5-8, Luke 18:9-14

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway
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God on the Other Side

Former professor of worship and author, Dr. Marjorie Procter-Smith writes, “Parables are like fishing lures: they are full of attractive features - feathers, bright colors - and they end with a sharp little barb!”¹ I came across this characterization of parables as I was preparing for this sermon. I like it. It rings true. Whenever our scripture reading for the day begins with, “Jesus told this parable...”, we know what is coming is bound to convict and challenge us, if we let it.

This morning’s text does not disappoint. On the the surface this parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a straightforward story about the dangers of spiritual pride, and the benefits of confession. Pharisees are regularly cast as the villain in the gospels, Jesus’ opposition over and over again. With this in mind we can easily hear this parable, judge the Pharisee to be a self-righteous hypocrite and assume that the moral of the story is to be humble: don’t think too highly of yourself like this Pharisee; rather be like the self-abasing tax collector, be humble.² Straightforward. Easy. Clear.

This is not a bad interpretation. It is one layer of this parable, I think. And this in itself may be the morsel of truth you or I need to hear this morning, that little bite of Gospel that we need to write down on a piece of paper and stick up on our bathroom mirror or on our refrigerator and live with and chew on this week. Be humble.

But we all know humility is a slippery slope, don’t we? How far down the humility path do we go before our prayers end up sounding suspiciously like the Pharisee’s, “Lord, I am so good at humble. Thank you that I are not like other people: hypocritical, preaching humility while they pat themselves on the back, being humble - for all the world to see, like that Pharisee. After all, I come to church

¹ Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, pg. 213.

² David Lose, The Pharisee, the Tax Collector, and the Reformation, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2813>

regularly, listen attentively to those sermons, and I know, I have learned, that I should always be humble.”³ The moment we think we have ‘humble’ nailed, that is the moment we are no longer humble.

What else might this parable say to us this morning? The introductory line gives us a place to start. The story begins by saying that Jesus told this parable to some, ‘who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.’

First we meet the pharisee. Now, as I said, it is easy to judge this person as the ‘bad guy’ of the story. But, as much as his arrogance offends us, what he says about himself is true, and the traits he lists are good by the standards we read of in Luke’s gospel. He *is* righteous. He is a disciplined adherent to the moral and ethical codes of his faith.⁴ He lives his life with character. And, truth be told, he does not bear any resemblance to the unsavory characters with whom he compares himself. You may not like his politics or even his personality but you can not fault his character and his devotion to his faith.

And then there is the tax-collector. Notice, there is no mention here that this man repented, changed his ways. No pledge to leave his job and render restitution to those he has cheated, no promise to turn his life around, to live a better life.⁵ He is, and as far as we know, will always be, one who cheats his fellow citizens, is in cohorts with the powers of the day, and generally has no redeeming qualities.

As former preaching professor, Fred Craddock put it, “The pharisee is no venomous villain and nor is the tax-collector, a new found saint, one who has found Jesus and leads a new life. If the Pharisee is pictured as a villain and the tax-collector a hero, then each here is getting what they deserve and the parable holds no surprise. *In Jesus’ story, what both receive is ‘in spite of,’ not ‘because of.’*”⁶

And here in lies the power of this parable, I think. Because, once again, as is so often the case with Jesus’ parables, this is not a story about figuring out who is good person or a bad person. Rather, it is a story about God. And in fact, all of our

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Luke*, pg. 211.

⁵ David Lose, The Pharisee, the Tax Collector, and the Reformation, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2813>

⁶ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Luke*, pg. 211.

efforts to try to figure it, to try to put ourselves or anyone else into categories, ‘good, bad, righteous, sinner, humble or self-righteous jerk are wrong. God never fails to surprise us on this.

The Pharisee is right about how he lives his life. Where he is confused is the *source* of that life. While he prays to God, he is caught up on praying about himself and he misses the source of his blessings and does not see God in others. He trusted himself and regarded others with contempt. And because of this he goes home not justified, not connected, not in community, with God or anyone.

The tax-collector has it all wrong in the life he leads, except for the one thing. He knows his life is in God’s hand completely. His past, present and future rest with God. And with that knowledge, with that confession, he is in communion with God and with God’s creation.

Humility is impossible to hold in our hands. The moment we grasp it it is gone. I think maybe this parable says the same is true about grace. When we hold claim to it, when we start to think we have earned it, can rightfully claim it because, ‘we are not like those thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors’, Republicans, Democrats... any other group that might come to mind, we lose it.

It is only when we let go, confess our need for God’s grace and mercy that our eyes are opened and we can see that it is that very confession, *and that alone*, that gives us life and community, connects us, justifies us, makes us right with God and with one another.

David Lose, Lutheran professor of preaching writes of this story, “As soon as we fall prey to the temptation to *divide humanity into any kind of groups*, we have aligned ourselves squarely with the Pharisee. Whether our division is between righteous and sinners, as with the Pharisee, or even between the self-righteous and the humble, as with Luke, we are doomed. Anytime you draw a line between who's "in" and who's "out," this parable asserts, you will find God on the other side.”⁷

God on the other side. How do we live with this? Maybe this parable is for me today a lesson in letting go, a lesson in seeing God on the other side. Or a lesson in not having sides! It is difficult these days particularly, isn't it? Especially as we approach November 8. Sides are drawn everywhere. What does it mean to see God on the other side?

⁷ David Lose, The Pharisee, the Tax Collector, and the Reformation, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2813>

This parable begins with the words, “Jesus also told this parable, to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” How do we work for justice, as we are called to do a Christians, and refrain from self-righteousness and contempt?

How easy is it for me these days to be the person to whom this parable is directed - sure I am right, judging others? How difficult is it for me to see God on the other side? This is a tough text. It has certainly hooked me these days.

Where does this parable speak to you? Where do you have trouble seeing God on the other side? Where is the hook that catches you?

And yet, as Craddock reminds us, this is through all, a story about God, about God’s mercy. Where are we, you and I, experiencing God’s mercy, not because of who we are or are not surely, but in spite of? For that is the good news of this story. God justifies, not you or I. And God is merciful.

May we see God on the other side these days, whatever that means for us.

May we live in God’ mercy. And may God’s mercy live in and through us.