

October 23, 2016
23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 18:9-14
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Preaching professor Marjorie Procter-Smith says that “parables are like fishing lures: they are full of attractive features – feathers, bright colors – and they end with a sharp little barb!” Parables are not simply stories with a moral tacked on at the end. The aim of a parable is not to comfort us. The aim of a parable is to provoke us, and then invite us to be transformed by God, to let our relationship with God “work on us”.

Parables were one of Jesus’ favorite teaching tools. More than prescriptive, parables are descriptive and evocative. Through parables Jesus held up a mirror for his listeners to see ourselves as we truly are, to look at human nature, the human condition as we live and know it. And also through parables, Jesus gave his listeners a God’s eye view of humanity, a look at God’s longing and loving intention for human life. Parables describe what the kingdom of God is like.

Right away, Luke gives us the reason Jesus told this parable: *“He told it to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”* This is strong language Luke uses to set the stage for the parable. We don’t know exactly to whom Jesus addressed this parable – it could have been his growing following, certain religious leaders, or even some of the disciples. For whomever it was intended, Jesus here diagnoses a common ailment of the human family.

We meet first a Pharisee in the Temple at prayer, and then a tax collector praying. It’s important for us to try and set aside our preconceived notions of what we think we already know about these two men. Amy Jill-Levine, a contemporary Jewish scholar in her book “Short Stories by Jesus”, provides a helpful Jewish corrective to our Christian assumptions about the nature of Pharisees and tax collectors. Pharisees represented a particular expression or sect of Judaism. Pharisees were concerned about Sabbath observance, dietary regulations, ritual purity, and promoting correct understanding and following of Torah. Not all Pharisees were hypocrites, as we often just assume, nor were they all out to get Jesus, despite what we read and may have learned from certain parts of the gospels. For the majority of Jesus’ listeners, the Pharisees would have been respected teachers, those who “walked the walk and talked the talk”. So the Pharisee in this parable IS a good and faithful, devoutly observant Jew. He is telling the truth when he recounts his spiritual practices. He has gone beyond the strictest understandings of Torah. Levine says “no Jewish text requires that everything one

owns be tithed. And likewise, there is no requirement for twice a week fasting.” This Pharisee has gone above and beyond duty and obligation in his rigorous spiritual practices. As he prays at the Temple, he begins by thanking God; he prays with an attitude of gratitude, which is certainly appropriate. He focuses on his individual efforts to be faithful and seems to be unaware of the tenor of his relationship with the tax collector, which becomes apparent as he prays. He is dismissive of their common humanity, as he thanks God that he is not like the tax collector and other “sinners”. He is seemingly oblivious to the negative impact this behavior and his words will have on the well-being of his faith community. Denying our common humanity results in broken relationships. And broken relationship is usually evidence of sin.

Well, the tax collector is identified and defined by his profession, not his spiritual practices. The text says he “stood apart”. It was not necessarily a common thing for a tax collector to go to the temple, and it would have taken some courage to go there to worship. The tax collector may have feared that fellow worshippers would shun him or do something worse, given his traitorous act of working for the occupying Roman government. Perhaps he felt unworthy to come before God. Perhaps by standing apart he is indicating his own sense of isolation. Yet he comes to pray. It is in the Temple that the tax collector believes he can find atonement, and he is correct. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity when he describes himself as a sinner in his prayer and asks for God’s mercy. The parable ends and we don’t know whether anything changes in the behavior of either of these men when they leave the Temple. The wrinkle, the surprise reversal is that the tax collector is the one who goes home justified, not the Pharisee.

There is a common human tendency Jesus holds up for examination in this parable that is more important than either of these men’s individual actions. The passage begins by referring to *“those who trusted in themselves as righteous and had contempt for others”*. Today, no matter if we are talking about our political, economic, religious, or social life – so much of our entire human experience from birth to death is based on comparing, competing, and categorizing. We know this system very well because we’re born into it, and it’s how we live, how life in our world is ordered. Always there is some sort of ranking: winners/losers, deserving/undeserving, insiders/outsideers, worthy/unworthy, smart/less smart, rich/less rich or poor. An insidious sin that plagues us as human beings is **contempt**. The Oxford Dictionary defines contempt as - *“the feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration, worthless or deserving of scorn; disregard for something that should be taken into account.”* The sin of contempt is about disregarding relationship with that neighbor right in front of us, believing and acting like it is okay to dismiss that person as an unnecessary part of our life. Being dismissive and unable to see our common shared humanity often leads to deep wounding and

division. And wounding and division can breed chaos, envy, anxiety, resentment, unrest, anger, and violence. Contempt wrecks and destroys community.

This is the flawed and broken human operating system with which we live. It is impossible not to be affected and infected by it. But, the good news is that while we do live in it, we don't have to live under its control. This broken human system is the whole reason for Jesus' coming - for his life, death, and resurrection. His was the work of turning the broken and violent way of our existence on its head, to establish forever in its place God's intentions for humankind. God's economy has nothing to do with ranking or measuring or earning anything, or being deemed worthy or unworthy of relationships. God's economy is not based on position, power, popularity, or prestige. It does not involve climbing a ladder to reach some pinnacle of "success". God's economy is framed by, fueled by, and sustained by the power of love, equity, and generosity of spirit. In God's economy, no person is disposable or expendable. And no one receives more of God's love than anyone else does.

And that's where the rub is for us, the "barb" in the parable if you will – in the distribution of God's mercy – the radical and equal outpouring of goodness and love, regardless of remorse or repentance or reputation. Medieval church theologian Thomas Aquinas described four kinds of pride. These can help us look more closely at our own behavior, so that we don't leave here today saying to ourselves, "Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee".

1. There's foolish pride. You think you have an excellence which you don't have, like a child who thinks he's the best basketball player in the world.
2. There's the pride of the self-made person. You think you have an excellence you do have, but you think you got that excellence for yourself, without anybody's help.
3. There's the sneakily self-congratulatory pride. You think you have an excellence you do have, and you recognize that God gave it to you, but you assume God gave it to you because God knew that you would make such good use of it.
4. And then there's the most self-deceptive kind of pride. You think you have an excellence you do have, and you recognize that you have it because God gave it, and you do acknowledge that God gave it because God is so good, not because you are so nice – BUT you are glad others don't have it and you hope they don't get it!

Uh-oh. Have you seen or experienced this, the major flaw in us – we don't want others to have more than we have, no matter what it is – stuff or smarts or celebrity? This is scarcity thinking, writ large. This is lack of trust in the goodness and mercy of God, and it is unwillingness to accept the wideness of

God's mercy for all. And sadly, left to our own devices, we just can't envision living any other way.

Well, praised be to the Holy One who has dreams for us far larger and more expansive than anything we can fathom. One of the most powerful biblical images for God's dream of the holy community of God's beloved is all of humanity gathered around the immense heavenly banqueting table. Picture this scene in God's dream: All of earth has been transformed by God's pure, total self-giving love. The air is full of laughter, energy, good will, peace and joy. Age is not important, because all belong and all are equally dependent on God's mercy, and all have gifts to offer each other. No person has one jot more or less of God's love than another. There is no assigned seating at the table, because all are equally precious to God. Jesus sits at Abba's right. The goodness and joy of the Spirit's presence and power flows in and through and around all the laughter, eating, loving, rejoicing, and leaning in to offer praise and thanksgiving that is happening around the table. The praise is offered in every language spoken on earth. There is no violence, no meanness, no gossip, no lying, no room for exalted egos – sin is gone forever! All has been healed, restored, forgiven and made whole. No signs of physical, emotional, mental or spiritual distress anywhere. No want or need of any kind, because we find ourselves safe and at home in God's presence. Nourished and sustained in this place of love, liberation, and life created for us. This is a place of abundance, a place in time where each one of us flourishes because all of us flourish together, as God's beloved.

My prayer for all of us is that we will let God have God's way with us. That we will let this loving, liberating, and life-giving relationship with the Holy One work on us to make this vision, God's dream, in fact, a reality. Our world desperately needs for God to be actively at work in us, transforming us from the inside out. And this is part of stewardship, recognizing and being grateful for the ways God is changing us from the inside, to look more and more like Christ. This is our task and our joy. For this we were baptized and empowered - pilgrims who need each other to take on this journey with Jesus in community. Today, may our sharing of the Holy Eucharist be a foretaste of that heavenly banquet in God's kingdom. That kingdom is here now. It is not yet fully present. And it will come fully in God's good time. God has dreamed it, and God's love is even now making it so through us. For your soul's hope and delight, come with joy today to meet the Lord – forgiven, loved, and free. And go then to share the goodness, the abundance, and the new life you have received. And all God's people said, **"Amen"**.