

Lines

Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22; Psalm 84:1-6; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

The thing with our gospel lessons is that we've heard them so often that it's easy to think we know what we're hearing, to believe it's what Jesus intended to say, only to discover that we've been off by a mile.

Today's gospel lesson is like that.

When we today hear the word "Pharisee," we think "religious hypocrite," right?

When we hear "tax collector," we think poor misunderstood man....

And so, when we hear this parable, we're likely to think that Pharisee is the bad guy, tax collector is the good guy, and God loves the good guy!

But that's most likely NOT how Jesus intended this story, nor how his original listeners heard it.

You see, the Christian spin room loses nothing to the spin rooms of Fox news and MSNBC.

For centuries, we've pilloried the Pharisees as a way of pillorying the Jewish people — and we've praised tax collectors — suggesting they are the one's Jesus really loved.

But in fact the Pharisees, for the most part, were liberal lay people who tried their best to help the regular folks stay in line with God's law.

And tax collectors, particularly toll collectors, which is what this scalawag is, were loathed by everyone, because they stole from their own people.

When our tax collector is hanging his head in shame, he's right to do it: he's got plenty to be ashamed about!

And when Pharisee says "thank God for the life I have," he's saying things that the people of the time admired, respected, looked up to.

So if the point of today's parable is not: "tax collector good, Pharisee bad," what is the point?

If Jesus told this story today, he'd maybe start out like this:

"A pope and a pimp went to the church to pray...."

Right away, we get the idea the pope is probably a pretty good dude and the pimp, ..., well, ..., he's a pimp!

So why is it that the pimp goes home justified while the pope doesn't?

After all, the Pharisee is faithful to his wife, he gives 10% of everything that comes into his house back to God as a tithe; even though he's required to fast only once a year, he fasts twice a week!

He's honest and trustworthy and grateful to God for all his blessings.

What parish priest isn't rolling out the red carpet for this fine man?

Who doesn't want this guy in their congregation and on their vestry?

Then there's Tommy the tax collector.

You want rotten?!

That's Tommy!

He's a combination strong arm man, loan shark and corrupt IRS agent.

He's not good at all.

But he goes home justified.....and the good man doesn't.....

What are you talking about Jesus?

Why give the president of the Rotary Club a punch in the nose while kissing the cheek of the small time crook?

It seems so unfair.

But maybe Jesus is taking us back to where all these troubles began, back to the garden, where our parents, Adam and Eve were given everything, everything, that is, except one forbidden thing:

"You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil.

The moment you eat from that tree, you're dead." Gn 2:16-17.

Of course they eat, consuming the knowledge of good and evil, deciding that rather than leaving judgments about who is good and what is evil to God, they themselves shall decide, as we now decide, what is good and who is evil.

And that tragic decision is our downfall.

No wonder we call it original sin.

It infects us all.

It's the root cause of gossip over the back fence (because gossip is only fun when I can judge you); of all destructive pride (because I can only be superior if you are inferior); of all nationalism and patriotism and wars (because "good" must defeat "evil"); and it's the root cause of our Pharisee, standing today in the temple, thanking God for not making him like this pile of human debris — this tax collector.....

Today, Jesus takes us back to the beginning, allowing us to reverse Adam's mistake, and give back to God the power to say who is good and what is evil.

How do we give that power back?

Like this:

"Judge not, and you will not be judged," Jesus says.

"Give, and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap, for with the measure you measure it will be measured back to you," Jesus says.

"Be kind to everyone you meet, because everyone you meet is having a tough time."

A fellow once said: "We don't see things as they are, we see things as **we are.**"

In other words, every thing and every one we encounter, we encounter through the distorted lens of our own experience, our own bias', prejudices, fears, hopes and dreams.

And because of that, we are not equipped to judge the difference between good and evil.

Today, Jesus asks us to look at ourselves not through our own eyes, or our neighbors eyes, or even our enemies eyes, but through God's eyes, the only One qualified to say what is good and what is evil.

And that can be a terrifying request, because we so often define who we are based on the approval we get from other people.

Terrifying because of the countless hours spent dressing up in front of the mirror of other folks' opinions, hoping to avoid the nightmare of showing ourselves to be naked and vulnerable.

Today's parable hurts because it insists that our true condition, like our parents in the garden, is nakedness; not the tuxedos or gowns we wear to impress one another.

That's why Tommy is justified and the Pharisee isn't.

Tommy knows what he is; the Pharisee doesn't.

When God refuses to justify the self-justifying Pharisee and instead justifies the naked Tommy, God is saying that "we will never be free until we are dead to the whole business of justifying ourselves," and dead to the whole business of judging others. Capon, Parables of Grace, 343, paraphrased.

For weeks now we have reflected on the character of God's mercy.

We've done it with unjust stewards and corrupt judges, lost sheep, lost coins, and lost children; and with pesky widows.

Today, it all comes home to you and I.

And the question is: "What is the character I need to receive God's mercy?"

And the answer, it seems, is this:

"Blessed are you merciful, you shall receive mercy."

"Blessed are you lost, God has found you."

"Blessed are you who delight in the unfair generosity of God, you will share in it too."

Jesus is the new Adam precisely because he makes us a new creation.

Jesus takes from us that deadly fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, giving it back to God, who alone knows how to exercise such power.

And in its place, Jesus helps us to come to grips with the reality of our circumstances.

That reality is this:

We are all dead.

Oh sure, we're running around just fine today.

But no one gets out of this life alive.

There's not a thing we can do to beat death: not good works, good looks or good manners.

Only the God who raises the dead can beat death.

And resurrection can't be bargained for or earned.

It's a gift.

Because the tax collector's hands are empty, God can fill them.

By admitting he's dead, he's open to the grace of God.

But the Pharisee prays with hands that are full; full of his own efforts; his own judgments; his own sense of entitlement, there's no place for mercy, for grace.

"Only when, like the tax collector, you can admit that you're dead - - only then can you stop running from grace.

Granted, acknowledging that you're dead is terrifying.

You might cry and kick and scream because it means putting yourself out of the only game you know, the game of justifying yourself and judging others.

But realize this: acknowledging that you're dead takes only one step;

and it's not a step out of reality into nothingness, it's a step from fiction into fact;

and it will make you laugh out loud at how short the trip home is, in fact, it isn't a trip at

all; you're already there." Id.

Only now, you have the eyes to see it.

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