

October 23, 2016

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Luke 18:9-14

Wrong and Righteousness

This Pharisee in today's gospel parable really gets it wrong, doesn't he? Jesus tells this parable, this brief and vivid and revealing story with a twist, and you can just see how wrong the Pharisee is. The Pharisee goes to the Temple, announces what a good person he is because of the things that he does: He fasts, he tithes, he prays. He prays—that's what he's doing with this announcing, right? He's talking to God, praying. "God I thank you..." But, of course, here's how this "prayer" continues: "God I thank you that I am not like that other person."

That other person, a tax collector, who also goes to the Temple, bows his head and beats his breast, begs for mercy. He is one of those other people that the Pharisee is glad not to be. "God I thank you that I am not like those others, like that tax collector," the Pharisee says. The irony is clear: the Pharisee says he does good, but then he looks at others like that, with disdain, with disparagement, with contempt.

What a terrible thing for the Pharisee to think. What a terrible thing to announce, as it is a prayer. How wrong that Pharisee is. Thank God we are not like him.

Of course, part of the brilliance of this parable, part of its twist is that as soon as we think that of him, we become him. The parable reveals how easily we do to the Pharisee what he does to the tax collector.

But the parable gets yet twistier when you take a closer look at both of them. The tax collector appears more sympathetic, for sure, but before we sentimentalize him and his role in the story, we should remind ourselves of the role of tax collectors at the time Jesus first told this parable. In the ancient world of the Middle East, tax collectors were not the equivalent of our accountants; tax collectors of that time and place were not a trained and regulated profession that helped people with paperwork and math. Tax collectors worked on behalf of the Roman government—Rome being an imperial power which had taken over by force the land where the first listeners of this parable lived. And then Rome extracted money from the people they conquered. Rome did this by sending out tax collectors, who were not Roman, but Jewish. So the tax collectors took money from their own people and gave it to their oppressors. Moreover, tax collectors were also known to add on to the amount they were told to collect, and to keep the difference for themselves, to pad that difference, to the great dismay, to the great detriment of many people, many of their own suffering people.

Pharisees, on the other hand, had an esteemed role in Jewish society. This is important to to remember, too, because in the New Testament we usually see the Pharisees not at their best, but they were a compassionate, moral center for a culture under siege. In addition, before we castigate the Pharisee (remembering that doing so, catches us by the same hook), before we villainize the Pharisee, we should take another look at those other parts of his announcement. Another irony, another brilliant twist of this parable, is that the Pharisee is actually doing some very good things: Fasting, focusing one's attention on God, following practices of faith. Being generous, tithing, giving away one tenth of his income. It may be tempting to toss out all the Pharisee says—after all, he's the guy who gets it wrong. Must be bad to go to church and tithe, right? It may be tempting to toss the Pharisee out whole cloth, but that misses an important twist

to this story, too: You can do good things, and still get it wrong. You can do what is right, but when you regard others with contempt you get it wrong.

What an incisive parable, what a pertinent parable, for us, in this Temple. How many people have been turned off from organized religion, because church people have treated them with contempt? What an incisive parable, what a pertinent parable for us, in this political season. How turned off are we all from the contentiousness, from the contempt? It feels we are drenched in it. As we drag our way towards November eighth, with political language at its worst, the lowest common denominator of both sides seems to be this announcement: “Thank God I’m not like those others.”

That is not what God says. In Jesus, God says just the opposite. God does not say I’m glad I’m not like those people. God says, “I’m going to become like those people. I’m going to become a person, and spend my time with all those people who are suffering, people who are causing suffering.” God sees us and thinks, “Those thieves, rogues, adulterers, and tax collectors, they need me. And so do the Pharisees.” Especially them. Especially us, when we are them.

Fred Craddock, a preacher and teacher of preachers who just recently he died, Fred Craddock was renowned for his stories. Craddock tells of a conversation he had on a plane¹. He sat down next to a woman, who asked him where he was coming from, what he was doing. He had been at a conference, working with Seventh Day Adventists.

“Are you a Seventh Day Adventist?” the woman asked, “No,” he said, I’m of the denomination “Disciples of Christ.” “Never heard of it,” she said. “So what are you doing with them?” He explained they were working together on sermons, church, things like that. “You’re not a Seventh Day Adventist, but you spent time with them,” the woman said. “Yes,” he said. She said, “Then you were othering.”

“I’m sorry,” Craddock said, “I’m not familiar with the term.” She said, “My preacher uses it all the time. He’s just making us sick with it. Go out and be with others. We ought to get acquainted with others. We ought to relate to others. Others, others, others, just always othering. If I hear one more time, one more sermon on othering, I think I will just throw up.” Then the woman pointed to the SkyMagazine open on her lap. “See this article here? A few years ago it would have been just in English, but now they’ve got to other: have it in Spanish, and also in Japanese. It’s just a fad. It’ll be something else next week. If I just hold out, othering will be gone.”

Craddock said, “Oh no, it’s not just a fad.” The woman said, “Well I’ve never heard of it before.” He said, “But it was there when Jesus died on the cross, all up the side there, Jesus of Nazareth, ‘King of the Jews,’ in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—three languages.”

In Jesus God becomes other, because instead of having contempt, God has compassion. God has mercy. God has mercy on tax collectors, and on Pharisees, and on that woman on the plane, and on us. We can receive it, humbly, and pray, pray that we may share God’s compassion with others.

¹ Story recounted by Fred Craddock, *The Renewed Homiletic*, ed. O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 47-48