

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
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A Tale of Two Prayers

In nomine...

I. Intro

The stories Jesus told delighted his listeners for various reasons. Those stories were colorful, they were often pointy, jabbing at someone who needed a little jabbing. And they were often surprising, containing unexpected characters and unexpected traps. Today's parable is one of those.

The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector has two characters. A quick reading of the story can lead many of us into a facile characterization of these two as “the bad guy and the good guy.” We Christians have a history of doing this, all the way back at least to St. Augustine. But Jesus' stories are never so simple, nor is the world in which we live.

II. Thesis

So let's start with the Pharisee. There's a Christian tradition, which carries with it a scent of anti-semitism, which loves to see the Pharisee as the bad guy. And it's true that Jesus is often seen to be in conflict with the Pharisees. But this is mainly because the Pharisees were the religious group most closely aligned with Jesus and his mission! They were the ones who lived among the people, interpreting scripture and telling stories to help people to take the traditions and the Word of God, handed down through the centuries, and to learn from them how to live in community with God and one another in the present time. The Pharisees were Jesus' conversation partner, and when Jesus, like the prophets before him, wanted to call the people back to an ever-more-true dedication to God, it was likely in the Pharisees that he found his closest allies and nearest reference point for his own teaching.

IIa. The Pharisee

So Jesus tells the story of a Pharisee. And let's try to hear this story with first-century Jewish ears rather than 21st century Gentile ears. (Or at least first-century Jewish ears *alongside* 21st century Gentile ears.) The Pharisee goes up to the Temple to pray. That seems like a good thing. The Pharisee knows that it is from God that he will find mercy and loving-kindness. He feels the need to be in God's presence and to find sustenance in God. And so he goes to the Temple. Isn't this why we come to church?

Hear what the Pharisee prays to God:

God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.

If we view the Pharisee negatively, we might say he's bragging. But Jesus' listeners would have been much more sympathetic to the Pharisee. He was a caricature, it is true: someone a little too good to be true, so they might smirk. But he was definitely someone to be admired, someone legendary, like a saint. If we listen as Jesus' contemporaries did, we might take a more positive view, too. Because what this Pharisee is doing is a perfectly acceptable, modern, western, Christian practice. He's counting his blessings.

I don't know about you, but when I sit with my family at dinner and offer thanks to God – and they nearly always make me pray, I don't know what it is – I regularly give thanks for the food we enjoy. I give thanks for a warm, dry house. I give thanks for our health. I give thanks, in other words, for all kinds of privileges and advantages that we enjoy and that we are sometimes prone to take for granted.

And there are how many other things for which to be thankful? What immense privilege I enjoy because I'm not a Muslim in Xinjiang, western China, where their cities are being turned into open air internment sites and thousands are being disappeared into concentration camps. Or in India where again the state has taken up a radical nationalist policy of ethnic cleansing and has even begun stripping Muslims of their citizenship? I'm not subject to the extreme violence and poverty of many neighborhoods in El Salvador or Honduras. I'm not struggling to live in Venezuela, where the rate of inflation is over 1M%! I'm not not threatened with deportation like the dreamers who were following all the rules, cooperating with the government, and now have become political pawns as a result. I haven't even mentioned the hungry, the homeless, the

untreated sick, the addicted, the unemployed and underemployed right here in Glassboro! But for whichever of these heart-breaking categories don't happen to apply to me at this time: I give thanks! And so does our fabled Pharisee!

Iib. The Tax Collector

The tax collector, on the other hand. This a character Jesus uses a number of times in his parables. Tax collectors are traitors, collaborators with the occupying Romans, who use the might of that foreign empire to take advantage of and even defraud their fellow countrymen. Tax collectors are universally despised: the people it is culturally appropriate to hate. Jesus likes to talk about tax collectors in a positive way for just these reasons: because having anything good to say about them is so shocking, so jarring to his listeners. It makes them sit up and pay attention!

And listen to the tax collector's prayer: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*

Not, "I repent, I renounce my job as a traitor to my people." Not "I will give back whatever I have defrauded" or even "I won't cheat people in the future." Not "I'm going to change and be a better person." Just a simple plea: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*

III. Good News

Jesus tells a tale of two prayers: two people praying, two different utterances. And then Jesus says something ambiguous, something the translators struggle with. That's what makes Jesus such a pro at parables: even the translators struggle! The NRSV says "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other." But that word "rather" could also be – and very often is – translated "alongside." Did one go home justified or did both? Jesus' words leave the question open.

Herein lies the trap in this story. Luke introduces the story by saying that Jesus offered it as instruction to those who regarded others with contempt. So we might understand the Pharisees' prayer as an expression of contempt for the tax collector. We might declare the Pharisee the bad guy and the tax collector the good guy. We might be tempted to utter our own prayer:

God, I thank you that I am not like other people: even like this Pharisee.

And that is the trap of the parable. We can easily, so easily, get worked up and fall into exactly the same trap of contempt for any person or group that we understand as distinct from, and less privileged than, ourselves. It is not the Pharisee, but we the listeners, who are challenged by this parable.

IV. Invitation

It seems the prayer that justifies before God consists not in depending on our own achievement or religious practice. That's what we do when we express contempt toward others. Instead, we become open to God's loving care for us when we depend completely on God's mercy. When I acknowledge that I am a sinner, I am imperfect before God. And that is something that I have in common with every other human being alive on this planet. It is what binds us together: our need for God and God's merciful love for us.

In the end there are no "good guys." Despite our best efforts, we all fall short and stand in need of God's mercy. And there are no "bad guys": none in whom the image of God has been completely erased. There is only us, God's beloved creation.

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