

October 23, 2022
"Sinners and Saints"
Joel 2:23-32 / Luke 18:9-14
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

A religious leader, a tax collector and Jesus walk into a bar. The bartender says, "What is this, some kind of joke?"

This parable we hear from Jesus this morning, as John just read for us, opens like a classic joke: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." But of course, it's no joke. In fact, it's a trap. In fact, two different traps. Listeners, proceed with caution.

The Pharisee, the religious leader, the keeper of Jewish law, arrives at the temple and offers his prayer to God. Standing by himself, he highlights, to God, his accomplishments as a religious leader and faithful Jew – fasting, tithing. He checks off all the boxes.

And he gives thanks, to God, that he is not like "other" people, "those" people; you know, thieves, rogues, adulterers and ... TAX COLLECTORS. And in particular, this tax collector, the one who has also come to the temple to pray.

Thank you that I am not like this sinner. Again, tax collectors a common stand-in for "sinners" among Jews in first-century Palestine, given their role as treasonous minions of the Roman occupation and their reputation for corruption within that role – skimming a little off the top for themselves.

But we remember that Jesus himself spends a lot of time with these tax collectors. One of his disciples, Matthew, or Levi, was a tax collector. We remember, earlier in Luke's gospel, that it is an accusation from the Pharisees and scribes – that Jesus is welcoming tax collectors and sinners, and even EATING with them – that prompts his parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son.

And it's worth noting that next week's reading features Jesus' memorable encounter with Zacchaeus, the "chief tax collector."

The Pharisee is presented here as a caricature, a caricature of religion for show, letter of the law at the expense of its spirit. A caricature of self-righteousness. The Pharisee is the obvious bad guy in this story, the “sinner” in clear contrast to the tax collector who typically gets cast in that role – and cast in that role by none other than the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the day.

Jesus continues to do his thing, flipping the script on common social and religious norms and assumptions. Listeners, proceed with caution.

THIS tax collector stands far off, presumably as far away from everyone else as he can. He can't even turn his eyes toward heaven, where he assumes God is looking down on him. He beats his breast and prays to God, “Be merciful to me, a sinner!” Kyrie eleison. God, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

Short and sweet. The tax collector unknowingly steps into his role as the good guy, exalted as the picture of humility before God. The one who is, in fact, closer to God.

The lesson is obvious: when we are full of ourselves there is no room for anything else. There is no room for God in us. For love in us. Only contempt for others.

But we fall into the parable's trap if and when we look down with self-righteous contempt on the Pharisee. If and when we exemplify the very same contempt the parable is so obviously condemning. We become the Pharisee. We are the Pharisee.

The Pharisees were not the ONLY audience for this parable. We're told at the start that Jesus is telling the parable “to some who trusted in themselves and regarded others with contempt.”

Well, it turns out that “some” is “all.” For “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

Listeners, proceed with caution.

But there is still another trap. We can walk away from this parable with its transparent lesson, its ultimate punch line: to be humble like the tax collector, to acknowledge that we are sinners all, all in need of mercy and grace.

After all, "All who humble themselves will be exalted."

But if we do that, if we try REAL HARD to act with humility, to act the "right way," we are still self-consciously, self-righteously seeking exaltation. We are humble SO THAT we might be exalted. Our quest for righteousness, for saintliness, only masks the reality of our sinfulness. We are still turning toward ourselves and away from the goodness of divine love.

It may not look like it, it may not be as obvious, but it's STILL pride. Just pride in humility's clothing.

That's the humility trap-within-a-trap of this parable. Jesus is always, ALWAYS, bringing us back to our hearts. To our centers. To greater self-awareness to replace self-consciousness. To deeper self-love to replace self-righteousness.

It's a difficult trap to avoid. The harder we work at humility for humility's sake, try to be humble, TRULY humble as God desires, the less humble we become. The lure of relative superiority remains.

But there is hope. Commentators from the SALT Project suggest one hopeful possibility, a paradigm shift. From work to play. From competition to cooperation. From exhausting self-consciousness to blissful self-assurance. From needless self-justification to liberating self-worth.

They point to the text that immediately follows this parable, where Jesus exclaims, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the (kingdom) of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the (kingdom) of God as a little child will never enter it."

Be like a child. Be humble like a child. Humble the way Frederick Buechner defines it.

“Humility,” he writes, “is often confused with saying you’re not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship.

“If you really AREN’T much of a bridge player, you’re apt to be rather proud of yourself admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy. True humility doesn’t consist of thinking ill of yourself, but of not thinking of yourself much differently than the way you’d be apt to think of anybody else.”

“It is the capacity,” he concludes, “for being no more or less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do.”

That’s play, that’s living, with nothing to prove to yourself or anyone else, only something to enjoy. Because, as a beloved child of God, you have nothing to prove. Abundance and joy grow from that seed.

As the SALT commentators put it, “... we think of play as a specialty of young children: fully trusting and dependent on the love and care of their parents or guardians, but (ideally) unabashed and unselfconscious about that dependence and trust. They aren’t trying to climb their way up into their parents’ love; rather, their parents’ love is the starting point, the foundation, the ground on which they stand, and the liberating context for all their work and play.”

“Let the little children come to me.”

Let the sinners, with their capacity for saintliness, come to me. Let the saints, with their capacity for sinfulness, come to me.

“Come to me,” Jesus says, “all of you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

In the end, this parable is an invitation, not a condemnation. If we’re being honest, we are, all of us, ALL of us, weary sinners and would-be saints, invited not to seek our own exaltation but a level PLAY-ing field for all. A safe space where we can engage with

ourselves and each other with authenticity, beyond RIDICUOUSLY simplistic and FALSELY dichotomous labels like “sinner” and “saint.” Good and bad. If only it were so easy!

To be sure, false dichotomies are the devil’s playground. They have no time or patience for the universal realities of nuance and complexity – and so they are at the root of most everything that divides us as human beings. That turns us, often violently, against each other.

Amy teases me that I always answer “yes” to “or” questions. Yes, for me, referring to whatever the latter option is, the one I hear last.

“Do you want to clean up the kitchen or watch another episode?” Yes.

“Should we run to the store tonight or just wait till the weekend?” Sure.

In this case, with this parable, “yes” IS the appropriate answer to the question. Are you the Pharisee or the tax collector? Yes. Are you a sinner or a saint? Yes.

Retired pastor, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, writes about the Pharisee and tax collector:

*They are not two people. Never are.
They are both me.
Sure of my worthiness, sure of my unworthiness.
Believing the illusion of deserving.
But only the trusting one,
open to what can only be a gift,
receives what is always offered
without deserving.
The other earns their little wage
and goes home still wanting.*

And similarly, Jeff Shrowder, another retired pastor, summarizes the parable with a brief poem called “Them and Us”:

*Two men
express in prayer
their life and world and hope;
one quite smug, the other made right
with God.

We hear these two pray,
yet looking deeply inward,*

see in each ourselves.

There is humility, and there is reward, gift, in seeing in each ourselves, acknowledging in ourselves capacity for both sinner and saint. AND seeing that capacity in each other. And so seeing that of God in each other, as the Quakers like to say. Even in those “other people” I can’t stand. Or I’m nothing like. Or I think I’m nothing like. We are sinners and saints all.

The American poet Dorianne Laux writes, in her poem, “In Any Event”:

*If we are fractured
we are fractured
like stars
bred to shine
in every direction,
through any dimension,
billions of years
since and hence.
I shall not lament
the human, not yet.*

*There is something
more to come, our hearts
a gold mine
not yet plumbed,
an uncharted sea.*

*Nothing is gone forever.
If we came from dust
and will return to dust
then we can find our way
into anything.*

*What we are capable of
is not yet known,
and I praise us now,
in advance.*

In that same spirit we hear the text from Hebrew scriptures, from the prophet Joel – the very text Peter quotes at Pentecost. A call to repentance, to what is yet possible if and when we turn around, turn back to divine love.

And a promise that emerges out of that love, a promise of space for dreaming, for living into a future filled with hope.

Following years of suffering where the swarming locust has destroyed, “The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. ... You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied ...”

“And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”

Dreams and visions that grow out of a spirit of love, of cooperation, of interdependency, of justice. Of resistance to false notions of sinner and saint, worthy and unworthy, insider and outsider, us and them.

Friends, humbly acknowledging that we are sinners and saints all, humbly acknowledging both our missteps and victories along the way, may we make room within ourselves, within this congregation, within our communities, for divine dreaming. For holy imagination to carry us, collectively, to new heights.

All who humble themselves together will be exalted together. May it be so.