

Pentecost 23, Proper 25, October 23 2016. Nigel Taber-Hamilton 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18
Luke 18:9-14

I'm going to begin by telling you about someone. When I lived in Bloomington IN, I got to know one of the I.R.S. employees in the local I.R.S. office. Not – you should know – because I was being audited! Still, even breathing “I.R.S” is often enough to bring a chill into the room and to stop us in our tracks! There's a certain stereotype, isn't there? That the IRS is made up of legalistic, narrow-minded, heartless individuals who revel in destroying ordinary people's lives. I wonder why we don't associate that stereotype with the “tax collector” in Jesus' parable? Yet for some reason he gets a ‘pass’ from us. The stereotype of the “Tax Collector” is for us rather neutral; we just don't associate the title “tax collector” with the stereotypical I.R.S. agent!

But the Pharisee doesn't get a ‘pass,’ does he? Today, the stereotype of a Pharisee that's developed – primarily from Matthew's gospel – is of a narrow-minded, unsympathetic legalist out to “get” anyone who opposed his view of faith – the very worst sort of religious leader. We class Pharisees with the “God Hates Fags” folk from the Westboro Baptist Church.

Jesus' listeners stereotyped too – and their stereotypes were different than ours: kinder to the Pharisee, harsher to the tax collector. For most Jews Pharisees were highly respected holy men. They were certainly the more liberal and flexible of the main Jewish groups, and their teaching and theology was very close to that of Jesus himself. So when Jesus breathed the name “Pharisee” the initial response of his listeners must have been – “Aha! The Pharisee's the good guy in this story.”

On the other hand 1st Century tax collectors – unlike my I.R.S. friend – were despised extortionists whose behavior pushed them outside of any respectable religious community. Tax Collectors bought the right to collect taxes on behalf of the hated Roman occupiers, then added a substantial surcharge so that they could pay the Romans what they wanted AND be left with a profit. the 1st Century stereotype was of a rapacious, merciless individual who dramatically overcharged his victims, knowing that they had to pay, otherwise they'd face the wrath of the Romans. To me, that sounds like a Mafia extortion racket! What if that tax collector had a nickname – “Ice Pick Willie” or “Mad Dog Mike?” Perhaps that would come closer to providing an accurate stereotype AND we might think differently of him.

As the story begins, then, Jesus' listeners' preconceived view would have seen “Good Pharisee, bad Tax Collector,” compared with our contemporary preconceived view of “Bad Pharisee, okay tax collector.”

Let me say something about parables in general. A Parable was and is a literary device intended to draw one sharply defined contrast between two perspectives, so parables tend to use two-dimensional figures. Everything is back or white, there is no grey.

A Parable only works if it shocks you! The punch line is the exact opposite of what you expect. So if you're not shocked, it's not a good parable! A great example is the parable of the Good Samaritan that came up in the Sunday readings over the summer. The presented vision of “Good

Samaritan/heartless Priest-Levite” doesn’t shock us. But what if it was re-told as “Good illegal immigrant smuggler/heartless doctor” – then the parable is both shocking and powerful.

That the “Bad Pharisee,” isn’t justified before God, but the “okay Tax Collector” is justified just doesn’t shock us. Only if we understand both the stereotyped view of the Pharisee as good and holy, AND understand the depth of hatred for stereotypical 1st century tax collectors does Jesus’ conclusion challenge us. What if a bishop wasn’t justified, but a neo-Nazi was? What then?

My takeaway is that we have to get the foundation right and then we can build on it.

What Jesus invited wasn’t a focus not on their actions but on their spiritual orientation – good or bad behavior wasn’t his primary concern here (though he certainly addressed the quality and authenticity of human actions elsewhere). What was his primary concern? Jesus was focusing on the difference between an unspiritual and a spiritual identity: the Pharisee was mechanically generous; he was self-focused, narcissistic and arrogant. The Tax collector, on the other hand, accepted that the way he was living his life lacked the moral integrity expected of him by his faith and begged for God’s forgiveness.

Actions alone aren’t the basis on which we find a right relationship with God; it’s our spiritual orientation – you can do the right thing, but for the wrong reasons; you can do the wrong thing, but still orient yourself toward God in a healthy way. So if I was to give this parable a title it would be this: the unspiritual Pharisee and the spiritual tax collector

That’s the end of this parable! That it only focuses on one topic – and that one so tightly – is why Jesus told so many parables. But while it’s the end of this parable it’s not the end of the story of our lives and our faith; life’s more complicated than one parable’s zinger punchline! For instance, it’s likely that the tax collector in this story wasn’t “The Main Man” – the real tax collector but an individual hired for a fraction of the taxes collected. Since collecting taxes was a despised profession, only the most desperate would take it on. If you were hungry, unable to support your family, desperate, if there were no other jobs, wouldn’t you take a minimum wage job, even if it involved manufacturing chlorofluorocarbons that destroy the ozone layer? So this tax collector’s story was likely much more complex.

And the Pharisee? He was a genuinely good man: he prayed and fasted regularly and he followed his faith’s call to be generous with what he had – one tenth – a tithe. His heart was in the right place; he just got carried away with his own self-importance and generosity. It’s not for us to judge him and find him wanting. Leave that up to God!

See them both as flawed human beings, both on the right path, but both needing God’s grace to help them past their struggles.

The truth of today’s parable is that it’s one window into the importance of developing and embracing a wholesome spiritual identity as the foundation for everything else we do and are. It leaves for another day the more complex issues of living that can challenge our ethics or our actions.

And that's a challenge to us, isn't it? We're being called s to look beyond outward behavior and think about internal motivation, to recognize that what, in the end, is really important is our spiritual orientation toward God and each other, because that's the foundation on which everything else is built.

Let us pray: O God, as we make our own spiritual journeys may we have the generosity but not the self-centeredness of the Pharisee; may we have the humility but not the ethical challenges of the Tax Collector; and may we have the insight and the wisdom of Jesus, that at the end of our journey we may say that we have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.
Amen.