

23 Sunday after Pentecost, October 27, 2013. On the Parable of the Pharisee & the Tax Collector
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If you want to understand today's parable I can think of no better place to start than with former Seattle P.I. political cartoonist David Horsley – or, I guess, any political cartoonist of note.

Irrespective of it's political content, each cartoonist has the same goal in mind: explain the often complex, frequently arcane realities of our world in a picture, only if necessary using words.

When you do that people get stereotyped

I recall that English political cartoonists always drew American men with buzz-cuts, big jaws, smoking cigars, wearing check pants, and clashing check shirts, with their wives always wearing those eye glasses that swept up at the edges, with hair piled high, and bobby socks and tennis shoes!

As one of my seminary friends from Berkeley CA observed, "it made it very easy for normal Americans to travel unrecognized in England, 'cos we didn't look anything like the caricature!"

So are there some Americans who have buzz cuts, smoke cigars, and shear checked pants? Sure.. But they're not really representative of all Americans. The real problem, though, is that many Brits think (or thought in the '70's) that they absolutely WERE representative – all Americans must look like this!

Step forward, Pharisee #1! This man is a stereotype – meaning his behavior was both very public and easily seen: any observer could say, accurately, "he's a Pharisee", while missing the truth that the behavior Luke describes wasn't characteristic of the spirituality of Phariseeism in general.

Here's a brief sketch of what we know about the Pharisees. They were, at various times, a political party, a social movement, and a school of thought among Jews of the second Temple period, beginning under the Hasmonean dynasty around 140 BCE in the wake of the Maccabean Revolt. They are the forebears of the Rabbinic Judaism from the 1st to 10th Centuries, and of most contemporary Judaism.

There were in Jesus' times two main schools of Pharisee thought - the Shammaiite and Hillelite. Jesus seems to have been preaching the Hillelite point of view throughout his public ministry – that's as in the great sage Rabbi Hillel. Here's a famous story about Rabbi Hillel: a gentile once challenged Hillel to explain the law while standing on one foot. Hillel answered: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation – go and study it." Yup, the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do to you"; almost every ethical tradition, religious or not has it.

The Pharisees were the party of the people – they stood in solidarity with those seeking justice and fairness – in other words, as a group, they were clearly remarkable people. It's not hard to see

how close their teachings were – especially Rabbi Hillel’s – to Jesus. So it should be no surprise that prominent Pharisees show up as supporters or friends of Jesus: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Gamaliel, the highly respected rabbi and defender of the apostles in the Book of Acts, and – well, who have I missed? Paul of Tarsus – St. Paul.

No religious group is totally heterogenous. I’ve often thought that if Jesus were to come today he would be just as hard on some of today’s Christians as he was on some Pharisees. So when we see and hear this Pharisee – or any Pharisee who appears in a negative light – remember that they’re not representative of all Pharisees.

Luke tell us in the opening of this passage who the parable was addressed to: those “convinced of their own righteousness, who also despised everyone else”. Notice that the Pharisee in this story is not talking to anyone other than himself – and, I suppose, God. And – first and last – what he said is – or appears to be – admirable: he began by saying “I thank you, Lord”, and he ended by observing that he tithed on everything *before taxes* and he fasted very regularly each week. So the challenge here is the middle bit: “I’m not like that tax collector”. Without Luke’s introduction we could easily interpret that phrase as “there but for the grace of God go I”, but that’s clearly not what Jesus meant according to Luke.

Once we understand the narcissism present in this man – his self-centered belief that he had it all sewn up – it changes the character of his other acts. They’re not done out of generosity or humility but to underscore his sense of personal superiority at the expense of others.

We’ve all met someone like this man – we recognize that their actions and words are all about scoring points, about establishing their sense of superiority and self-importance. And – let’s be honest – sometimes, we are them.

It’s also really clear that Jesus doesn’t tell this story to say, “this Pharisee is characteristic of all Pharisees” – that would be like the pot calling the kettle black. Jesus describes the Pharisee in this way because he is so not like all Pharisees!

But this caricature of the Pharisee is seductive! It invites prejudice, invites Jesus’ listeners upon hearing the Pharisee’s prayer thanking God for “not being like that tax collector over there” to nod their heads and say, “yeah, that’s about right”. Because there was no love lost for these hated agents of the occupying power – they were almost beyond the grace and mercy of God.

It’s easy for us to think in exactly the same way about other human beings who “aren’t like us”, isn’t it?! Governments always encourage their citizens to think that way about what ever nations happen to be fighting them – the enemy can’t be human, or we’d have real difficulty killing them.

When Jesus next described a tax collector his listeners must have been puzzled. The picture is of a man who’s a humble contrast to the puffed-up Pharisee. He stands far off and adopts the customary posture for prayer: arms crossed over the chest and eyes cast downward. This presentation was of exemplary, faith-filled behavior. But, Jesus’ listeners must have reasoned, “so what?!” It wouldn’t count, because as a despised tax collector he was beyond the pale! Think

Mafia 'soldier' coming to collect "protection" money, and you get the idea!

So the truly shocking thing about this parable is that it's the tax collector, not the pharisee, who's accounted "righteous." Why? Because the Pharisee needed nothing, he didn't need God, really; he didn't need other human beings, especially not such a "low life" as the tax collector.

The tax collector, on the other hand, recognized he needed God. When we recognize our need for God, and we do so because we recognize our own failings and realize we need the help of someone else – of God – because we can't alone get ourselves out of the hole we've dug for ourselves, *we've taken our first step on the pathway toward healing.*

And – importantly – the tax collector didn't reciprocate the Pharisee's mean-spirited dismissal of his humanity and worth before God. It would be easy – and wrong – to look at the Pharisee and dismiss him because he's not like us – or, at least, not like the way we think of ourselves.

So this parable is a real challenge to us, as much as to Jesus' listeners! We claim a God who forgives but we're really not that great at forgiving each other let alone our enemies. We say that we believe in the mercy of Jesus but we're often unwilling to follow him where the rubber meets the road in expressing that mercy. I wonder: has modern Christianity succumbed to the comfortable spirituality of the Pharisee in this parable? You be the judge...remembering, of course, that it's yourself you are passing judgment on, not "those others".