

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18: 9-14
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
October 23, 2016

“He also told them this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

As with the parable we heard last week, we are meant to keep this statement in the forefront of our minds as we listen to the story Jesus tells. In the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, Jesus wants those who are losing heart and giving up on the practice of prayer to overhear the parable and be encouraged. In the same way he hopes that those who are overly confident in their status with God will hear and change their attitude.

The earliest commentators on these parables make a link between the two. They propose that the two parables are given to the same group of disciples and others gathered to listen to this Rabbi. We might say that the intention is in the first teaching, to comfort the afflicted. In the second it is to afflict the comfortable.

I am drawn to this approach. It confronts me with the fact that I am not the perfect model of what it means to be a Christian. It reminds me that the community of faith is not made up of saints and sinners. On a good day we are saintly sinners—that is, we are people whose sins, by God’s grace, point to hope, mercy and forgiveness for all God’s children. It is the humble and joyful experience of God’s welcome in Jesus which says, “If God in Jesus can love and forgive me with my checkered past and checkered present, God can do the same for you.”

On a bad day, however, when we forget that we are forgiven sinners, we can become sinful saints. We are impressed by the fact that, unlike *real sinners*, we have a claim on God’s

approval. After all, look at all we do for God, and the way we support the church. Look at what fine upstanding people we are—*unlike those people*.

One of my favorite bands, the Austin Lounge Lizards has a song called “Jesus Loves Me” which goes:

I know you smoke; I know you drink that brew.
I can't abide a sinner like you.
God can't either, that's why I know it to be true
that, Jesus loves *me* but he can't stand *you*.

There's more, but I think you get the drift. But take a moment and reflect on how you reacted. I laughed hard when I first heard it because I feel that my faith has been hijacked by Christians who have turned the merciful welcoming embrace of Jesus into a rigid morality of right and wrong: right belief and wrong belief, good behavior and bad behavior, the selective use of scripture to justify a limited and constricted vision of life. The words of the song vindicate my approach to Christian faith. I enjoy the moment of being *not like those people*.

And then I hear a voice which whispers, “Then he told them this parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” Slowly, it dawns on me that I am enjoying reveling in the fun being made of *those people*. I am no tax collector, bewailing my sins and imploring God's mercy! I am no humble penitent concerned only with my not too pretty and shadowy life. I have changed places with the self-righteous Pharisee.

After all, unlike him, I am open-minded, accepting and non-judgmental. I don't condemn people. Actually I don't condemn people so much as feel morally and spiritually superior to them. With Lucy in Peanuts I can say, “If everyone agreed with me, *they'd be right!*”

So, ok, I get the message about trusting in myself that *I* am righteous. This is why I believe that Jesus' parable is *at least* addressed to the disciples to remind them that they have no special status with God. They have curried no favor with God by following Jesus in such a public way.

But there's the next bit: *...and treated others with contempt*. The English word contempt comes from the Latin word meaning scorn. The Greek used by Luke goes farther—it means to see something or someone as *worthless*. So when Jesus tells this parable with an eye on people who trust in their righteousness and treat others with contempt he means that they look upon those people as so much garbage to be tossed away.

Notice again how necessary the introduction to the story is critical to a full understanding of the parable. On its own, the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector seems a bit simplistic. Like the episode involving Jesus' two friends, Mary and Martha, we are presented with two extremes. In this case it is an over the top arrogant Pharisee and a tax collector who is too humble to be real. Like Mary and Marth we look for a blending of the two.

After all, it is not wrong to practice our faith in a full and intentional way. In the same way there is nothing terribly uplifting about a state of perpetual moral and spiritual prostration. It gets tiring after a while. I want to follow the tax collector out of the temple and see if he does anything different. To borrow from John the Baptist, are there *fruits to his repentance*; or is he, in the words of the country song, simply "getting high on being low?"

The opening of the parable gives us focus. We are to use it as a lens by which we seek to understand it. So having said this, what might we learn from this parable?

One learning that occurs to me is this: Anytime I take my eyes off of following Jesus and start comparing myself to others I get into trouble. The disciple Peter found this out when he took his eyes off of Jesus while walking on a stormy sea—he began to sink. When I take my eyes off of Jesus and start comparing myself to others at least two things happen, neither are good. I compare myself favorably and feel superior, or I compare myself negatively and feel inferior. In the first case I judge the other by my perceived strength and wonderful qualities. In the second, project my sense of inferiority on the other and nourish resentment and jealousy in my heart.

In the first case I am blissfully ignorant of the great shadow that extends behind me—all of my pettiness, insecurity, fear and doubt. In the second case, I wallow in my helplessness and judge others for not appreciating me or not seeing all of *their flaws*. *“They’re no better than I am!”*

But when my eyes are on Jesus I am aware of my great need of his grace. I do not hide my whole self from God and I experience the freedom of knowing that God loves me as who I am. This is what happens when I love the Lord my God with my whole heart, whole mind and my whole strength.

And the second thing that happens is impossible to separate from the first. When my eyes are fixed on Jesus and I am receiving his grace, I become aware that the people around me *are like me*—forgiven sinners seeking God’s tender and unconditional love. We discover that the gift God has given us is so great we want to share it. In short we begin to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.