

Sermon October 23, 2016 Luke 18:9-14 Zephaniah 3:1-13 “Who Is the Good Guy?”

In our Gospel lesson today Jesus told the story of two men who went to worship – one ended up bragging about all the good things he had done. The other begged for God’s mercy. One thought he had no problems, the other thought himself to be nothing but problems. One was full of himself, the other felt totally empty. The story has been told and retold so often that we know who the good guy is going to be, so the story has no shock value for us anymore.

Jesus' original hearers, though, were startled by Jesus’ story. Pharisees, while perhaps not well-liked, were at least highly respected for having godly and upright ways. A Pharisee was considered above reproach. A tax collector, on the other hand, was considered to be the scum of the earth by the Jews. Those Jews who served as tax collectors had turned their backs on their own people to work for Rome. “The tax collectors did have one appealing virtue. The tax collector was one everybody else could abhor and look down upon. A person could always look at a tax collector and say, ‘Well, *there’s someone* worse than I am!’” (from J. E. Kalas)

If there’s one thing we human beings do well, it is comparing ourselves to others. I might be pretty, but she looks SO much better. I’m thankful for what I have, but that family has a lot more. My grade is decent, but that student got an award! My car works, but their car is so much better...

When one of our politicians was caught making lewd remarks, he pointed to another person and said, “But HE did so much worse!”

One thing that comes through Jesus’ story clearly is that we are not going to impress God with our comparisons, excuses, or holiness; we are not going to impress God with our giving, we are not going to impress God with what we have accomplished; we are not going to impress God with the fact that we think we have been better than most people.

The Pharisee in today’s story was not a bad man. We’ve seen that he even had a spirit of gratitude. He went to worship and offered what was considered to be the best kind of prayer, thanksgiving to God. We are so accustomed to seeing the Pharisee as the “heavy” in this little drama that it may be impossible for us to put ourselves in his shoes. We may fail to recognize ourselves in him.

It is likely that most congregations in Western Christianity are largely composed of folks who are not so different from this Pharisee. We may be people who congratulate ourselves on our moral achievement. We we are likely to do so as we read the newspaper or watch the evening news. In our hearts, we may be saying, “Thank you, God, that I don’t throw litter out of my car; that I obey the speed limits and don’t drive drunk. Thank you that I have held down a responsible job; that I curb my dog and don’t do any serious cheating on my income taxes. Thank you that I am not as pushy as others in the supermarkets, that I’m not as greedy as most, that my house isn’t as showy as theirs, that I don’t drag our nation down by being on welfare; that I am an informed voter, that I devote much of my time to worthy causes... If everybody could be more like me, there wouldn’t be so much trouble in this world!”

Who is the good guy in Jesus’ story? Those of us familiar with this story know to choose the

underdog, the tax collector, and we may want to identify with him. "Yep, that's me, I know I'm a sinner, so I'm the good guy." But by seeing ourselves as the good guy, we have already fallen into the trap.

A parable can sometimes be a window through which we can look out and see the world and understand it a little better. And sometimes that parable can be a mirror into which we can look and see ourselves and our own lives more clearly. When we see the world we understand how easy it is for people to lose sight of their own failures in life and how they then become unwilling to forgive others. When we see ourselves we realize that we too need that forgiveness, that grace, that compassion that God offers us.

Every week we say the Lord's Prayer, and in it there is the phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." *Forgive us of the sins we have made against you, O God, just as we forgive the people who have sinned against us.*

But unless and until we open ourselves to offer forgiveness to others, we are not open to the forgiveness that God would give to us.

Alan Wagoner, preaching to his congregation in Berkeley, Ca. proclaimed that it is this inability to forgive that delivers us to the jailer. By choice or by default it is our unbending spirits that bar the door to our cell. Our prisons are of our own making. When we do not forgive those around us they become a threat to us, a living hell that suffocates and destroys.

Thomas Merton defined hell in terms of the unforgiving, saying, "Hell is where no one has anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another nor from themselves. They are all thrown together in their fire and each one tries to thrust the others away from him with a huge, impotent hatred. And the reason why they want to be free of one another is not so much that they hate what they see in others, as that they know others hate what they see in them: and all recognize in one another what they detest in themselves, selfishness and impotence and agony and terror and despair." *Seeds of Contemplation*

So what are we to learn from Jesus' story? God does not ask us to come into worship time with a report of how good we are. God invites us to grow more fully into relationship with God – a relationship we have not earned by working hard, or won because we are lucky, or received for any reason other than that God has claimed us as God's very own people.

In his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus had the "bad guy," the tax collector, end up as the one justified - made right with God. "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

He was justified (made right with God) in God's sight because he allowed himself to be honest with God during the prayer. Something happened between the tax collector and God during the worship service. The Pharisee, on the other hand, had everything all sewn up, so that there wasn't any room - or really any need - for God.

Our world is full of problems. Any one of us could fill a page with what is wrong; everything from greed to pollution to divorce to overpopulation to terrorism to starvation to cancer to drunk driving to lousy workmanship to drug addiction to television to ineffective schools to the economy to the way politicians use their mouths in the time preceding an election.

But underneath all these problems there is a very basic one in our society: We don't make room or time for God, and we are slow to see that we all need God. If we don't care about God, we probably won't care all that much about each other. Apathy becomes common. More and more folks decide that God is a nice idea but little more than that. So the list of what is wrong in the world and in our neighborhoods gets longer and longer. Society becomes all about "Me" and *my* fulfillment in life. Encouraging our fullness doesn't help us make any room for God. More and more of those who consider ourselves "serious Christians" have no inkling that God may be wanting to talk with us right now about what we are doing with our lives.

I am reminded of the old story of the seeker who went to see the wise man of a far away city. The wise man invited the seeker into his tent, and started to pour the seeker some tea. As the seeker held his cup, the wise man poured, and did not stop pouring even when the tea spilled over the brim of the cup and fell onto the ground. Stunned and burned, the seeker cried, "What are you, blind? Can't you see that my cup is already full?" The wise man stopped pouring and looked the seeker directly in the eyes. "Oh yes, my friend, I can see that the cup is full. You will not be able to receive anything from me, for you are already full to the brim of yourself. Leave. Come back when you are empty."

The passage we heard from the book of Zephaniah seems to be a miniature of the entire Biblical message. God created humanity to live in close relationship with God, but humanity continually has turned our back on God and refused to love each other. God has persistently asked - through the prophets and through Jesus - us to see how we have failed to be an obedient people, but we continue to go our own ways, to be filled with our own agenda. But God still has hope for us. God acts to get our attention, hoping that we will recognize God's correction of us, but we continue in our corruptions. So God will someday apply God's judgment against us, but with one purpose and hope: "At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord."

What do we learn from today's scriptures? We learn that God will fill us where we are empty, that God will save us where we need saving, that God will meet us where we find ourselves. We don't have to "look holy," or pretend to be godly or loving. God already knows who we are, the good and the bad.

Richard Lischer, professor of preaching at Duke University Divinity School, told about the funeral of his uncle:

"We went to his funeral not too long ago - with some uneasiness. He had died of cancer at the age of 53: a gifted man, a doctor and professor of medicine; he was a brash, self-reliant person, for most of his life a pagan whose nickname, "Turk," seemed to fit perfectly. His humor always bordered on the obscene. His behavior was similar. Shortly before he died, though, he became a Christian.

"As we gathered for his funeral, there was this unspoken hope among the family that the priest and

perhaps even God had not known Uncle Turk's down-to-earth ways. But this hope was quickly dispelled by the priest's magnificent funeral sermon, which he began with these words: 'We are gathered together to give thanks to God that he has received unto himself this outrageous, profane man.' The priest knew Uncle Turk, and his words, like those of Jesus, were a way of saying, 'This is how God knows us all, this God who, in his mercy, is the refuge of the refuse.'" (adapted from *Pulpit Resource*, vol 23, no. 4)

It has been said that the church is the only institution in the world whose sole requirement for membership is knowledge of one's unworthiness...

God knows who we are, who we *really* are, deep down inside when the night seems to become our enemy. God sees the causes of our anxieties. God understands our self-centeredness, and the times when we have trouble believing that God even exists. God celebrates the moments when we do wonderful things for others, and holds us the days we find ourselves overwhelmed by fear or anger or grief or pain. God knows who we are.

We bring ourselves to worship. The "Good Guy" is never us; it is the open-eyed love of God as poured out through Jesus. Jesus knows first-hand our betrayals, our empty promises, our striving for better positions for ourselves, and how easily we push our Lord to the back of our "Interests" list. And yet God continues to be with us, to speak to us, and to claim us as God's own children. We don't have to utter the "right" prayers or words; we simply need to open our hearts and cry out: "I need you, God. I cannot make myself good. I need you." So we are here, in worship, to offer ourselves to the Good Guy! Thank God! Amen.