

“What’s Wrong with Righteousness?”

Text: Luke 18: 9-14

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But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ Luke 18:13

It has been said that there are two types of people in the world: those who think there are two types of people in the world and those who do not. (1) On the surface, the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican appears to reinforce the two-type position. There are two characters in the story, who are poles apart. One was considered a saint, the other a sinner. Each approached prayer in an entirely different manner from one another. Jesus told their story to a group of people, who along with just about everyone else, believes there are two types of people in the world. As Luke tells it, Jesus’ audience consisted of certain people “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and who regarded others with contempt.”

While you are pondering which category you fit into, the righteous or the unrighteous, I will point out that today is Reformation Sunday, the Sunday closest to the 31st of October, which is the anniversary of the day in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five theses on the door of the cathedral church at Wittenburg, Germany. Among Luther’s complaints against the Catholic church was a system that had grown over the years in which one earned good works that could be turned into merits that could be sold for a fee, with priests and the Pope in charge of the distribution system. Luther was uneasy with this system of indulgences. He had been a Catholic monk, but because he was considered a trouble-maker, he had been thrown out of the church by Pope Leo X. For most of his life, Luther worried about which category he belonged in: saint or sinner. He came to take great comfort in recalling the simple, central fact of his life, that he had been baptized. Therefore, he was redeemed by the grace of God and not by his own goodness, which in Luther’s mind, fell woefully short of what God required.

Along with Luther, John Calvin was one of the leaders of the Reformation and was the father of the Reformed Protestant tradition, in which the Presbyterian Church stands. Calvin was less tormented than Luther was, perhaps because of his infatuation with that grand old doctrine called *total depravity*. Calvin liked the idea of total depravity. The doctrine is either taught or presupposed on just about every page of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. What it is, as succinctly as I can express it, is the belief that ever since the fall of Adam, and if we want to be

inclusive, Eve, the human race has been enslaved to sin, and apart from the sovereign grace of God, is unable even to choose the good, unable to accept redemption as God offers it without divine intervention. The word “total”, used in this context means, not that every person is totally evil, but that sin effects every aspect of human nature. There is plenty of scriptural support for the idea of total depravity. In Genesis, the Lord saw that “the wickedness of humankind was great upon the earth and every intention of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” (6:5) In his gospel, John wrote, “The light has come into the world and the people love the darkness rather than the light. (3:19)

Well, what shall we 21st century heirs of Calvin think about these complex matters of righteousness and unrighteousness? Is the human race divided into the good guys and the bad guys, and if so, which is our crowd? I believe Jesus helps us immensely with these two questions as he invites us to step into the story that we heard from the gospel of Luke. I believe that for the most part, we belong in the crowd that listened to Jesus tell the story, as much as we would not want to admit it. There is probably not a person here who doesn't feel superior to someone else about something. My mother and her sisters-in-law had a great rivalry about who made the best pound cake. My mother was a saint, but she did feel superior to her sisters-in-law in that regard. So here we go, with the righteous and the superior crowd, into the temple where we see two men who have come to pray at the same time. They don't know one another. One is labeled or called a Pharisee, a word that I resist using these days because through usage, it has come to mean that the Pharisee is a villain or a bogey man; it even has anti-Jewish overtones. (2) The Pharisee was simply a righteous person who did what he was supposed to do. He was an elder in the church, the president of the Rotary Club, the person who organized all the volunteers for the School Carnival. He was the good guy who obeyed the laws of God, and he came to the temple to present his righteousness. His prayer posture was one of pride in himself. He extended his hands; he lifted his uncovered face to heaven.

He uttered his prayer with a confident voice. “God, I thank you that you have not made me like other people.” That's Part A of his prayer. He's especially grateful that he's not like the tax collector over in the corner. After he finishes thanking God for his uniqueness, he offers a litany of his good deeds. Interestingly, in his prayer, he says nothing about who he is. He knows who he is not. He is not like all those other people, and he knows what he has done. He's done what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't seem to know himself. (3)

I wonder if you know anyone who just has to make sure that someone else is cast in the worst possible light, so that that person can feel good about him or herself? There are so many who are wrapped up in what they're against and whom they feel superior to, and whom they hate, or whom even they would love to see destroyed. Without that righteous sense of superiority, they would have little or nothing. Almost all prejudice in a society and in a human heart comes from this source, I believe. I am so proud that one of our former pastors signed

that Ministers' Manifesto in 1957. It reads in part, "Hatred and scorn for those of another race or for those who hold a position different from our own can never be justified."

There are many people whom you simply cannot satisfy. They are judging you always, sometimes - oftentimes, in the name of Jesus Christ, ironically enough, who warned righteous people not to go around with stones in their own pocket, saying, "Let those who are without sin cast the first stone" and "judge not, lest ye be judged" and "blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." The good man's problem was that he had to look down on others so that his own ego could remain inflated. He did what he was supposed to do. He obeyed the rules. He honored God, but you get the sense, don't you, that his heart just wasn't in it? He checked off his list of obligations, but he kept his soul to himself. (4) So there you have the good man.

Standing far off was one called a Publican, or a tax collector, again, an overused and often prejudice-invoking term today. But he really was a bad guy, corrupt, dishonorable, and in cahoots with the Roman Empire. (5) The tax collectors fleeced the poor and lined their own pockets as they did so. You could even call him a traitor to his own people. He tells the truth when he bows in a posture of humility and yes, shame. He beats his breast without even looking to heaven and cries out to God for mercy.

I remembered this week a wonderful story told by a noted newspaper man, Lincoln Steffen, about a friend of his who was mayor of Toledo, Ohio. One day a reprobate in the town walked in to the mayor's office and said, "Mayor, tell me what you stand for."

The mayor said, "I can't stop my work to tell you that. It would take too long."

The reprobate said, "Well, you ought to be able to put what you stand for in just one word."

"If I had to do that I would say that I stood for justice."

"Oh no. I hope you don't stand for justice, because if you stood for justice, I would get it, and it wouldn't be a pretty sight. I've always hoped and prayed that you stood for mercy." (6)

That was the tax collector exactly, hoping and praying that God stood for mercy. Look at them. Can you see them from God's point of view? From God's point of view, things look different than from our own point of view. One is reviled by society, the other admired by society, and yet that's not how it goes with God. When the sinner appeals to God's basic nature, which he hopes is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," he utters a prayer that pleases God.

Jesus says to all the people, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for those who exalt themselves shall be humbled, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted.” Please note that the good man actually was never mentioned again, and the bad man got even more than he had asked for. He’d asked for mercy, but what he received was justification. In other words, he was in a place now where everything had been set right between him and God, not because of his own goodness, of which he had little or none to offer, but because of the gracious, merciful nature of the God.

“The radical from Nazareth,” which is what Jürgen Moltmann calls Jesus, turns everything upside down. What are we to make of this? Two things I think. At least this, and it’s hard to hear: When we claim the good for ourselves and create a gulf between us and those whom we deem unworthy, we are also at the same time severely distancing ourselves from God. Self-righteousness separates. Truth reconciles. That’s the way it has been, and that’s the way it will be.

And what about this? What if the Pharisee and the Publican are not just prototype individuals out there? What if they represent the two sides of human nature? (7) What if the Pharisee and the Publican reside, actually, in your heart and mine? Finally, I believe that there is just one type of person in the world - flawed person, all of us flawed, sinful human beings - but also beloved human beings, beloved by God and given a Savior who is for us all the way.

In last week’s reading, Jesus said to the people, “Pray always and don’t lose heart.” Today he tells us the words of the prayer that God most wants to hear – “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” We name our brokenness before God, trusting that where we are broken, God will mend.

Remember the great motto of the Reformation? “*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*” – “The church reformed, always to be reformed.” Us too, reformed, always to be reformed by the mercy and grace of God. I don’t know what brought you to church today, a boatload of guilt, or a laundry list of virtues, but I hope that you will go from this place with the tax collector’s heart, a grateful, glad recipient of the miracle of mercy, which makes you new again and again and again.(8)

(1) William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, October, November, December, 2004.

(2) Jürgen Moltmann, “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector,” *A Chorus of Witnesses*, Edited by Thomas G. Long & Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Eerdmans, 1994, p. 22-33. Much of the insight in my sermon comes from this great classic of a sermon by Moltmann.

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *Ibid.*

(6) as told in Steffen’s *Autobiography*.

(7) Moltmann.