

For Private Distribution Only

Last week it was the unjust judge and the persistent widow. This week we have the pious Pharisee and the sinful tax collector. This month Jesus is on a roll with parables that are studies in contrast!

As we’ve discussed before, the Pharisees have gotten a bad rap over the centuries as a result of one too many gospel portrayals as Jesus’ rivals. This reputation despite--or perhaps *because*--of the fact that they were Jesus’ closest theological kin. Sharing a depth of knowledge and respect for the Jewish law. But the Pharisees **observed** that law far more rigorously than Jesus did. In a religion that was and is expressed primarily through practice, rather than belief, this was no small matter, but a point of pride. Devout, respectable, and learned, the Pharisees were the scholars and judges, indeed, **the good people**, of their day.

Enter a tax collector... Now I trust that **none of us** here this morning is especially fond of the IRS. But I would venture to say that today’s tax men and women are not universally despised in the same way that the tax collectors of **Jesus’ day** were. We’re not talking about benign or bureaucratic government employees here, but **collaborators with the occupying enemy**, the Roman Empire. As contractors for the empire, tax collectors were free to exact payment in whatever manner they saw fit. And to inflate the amounts due in order to collect healthy commissions for themselves. By definition, they were **wealthy...and dishonest**. Extortionists, more or less. And as handlers of money and agents of a Gentile empire, by Jewish law, they were **ritually unclean** to boot.

But they were fellow Jews. In fact, that's probably about all tax collectors had in common with Pharisees. And that's how a tax collector and a Pharisee happened to find themselves both praying in the Jewish temple in Jesus' parable. Now the tax collector was fully aware of his shameful status and so he stood alone, off in the shadows. He was too caught up in his prayers to notice his surroundings that day. But not so the Pharisee. In fact, so observant was the Pharisee that the tax collector even wound up in the Pharisee's prayer! "God," he said, "I thank you that **I am not like other people**: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like *this tax collector*. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." ...Pretty impressive, this multi-tasking Pharisee! Not only was he praying, boasting, and people watching in the synagogue, but he was competing with his neighbors and winning!

Meanwhile, the tax collector was filled with shame for all that he had done and been. He could not bring himself to look up to the heavens. No, his eyes were glued to the ground as he beat his chest like a woman in mourning. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" he cried out in anguish as he looked only into *his own sinful heart*. And, God, recognizing his contrition and humility as sincere, sent him home justified. End of story!

Or not...

Did you happen to fall into the trap that Jesus set for his listeners? By any chance did you find yourself condemning the Pharisee for judging the tax collector and all those other sinners? Or for bragging and taking all the credit for his own piety and character? It's really hard not to, as pompous and presumptuous as he is: To not give God--or at least maybe his parents or mentors--some credit for his accomplishments. To not even know this tax collector and put him in the

same category as thieves, rogues, and adulterers! To use his prayers as a platform for condemning other people. That takes some nerve!

Oops.

Basically, there's no way out of this parable without taking Jesus' bait: Finding ourselves playing the Pharisee's game, judging and striking a self-righteous pose against him. As much as we'd like to believe we're the earnest tax collector in the story, it's nearly impossible not to be critical of the Pharisee.

It's a pretty neat trick Jesus has pulled, but supposedly the parable works even better when it's updated with the Pharisees and the tax collectors of *our day*. One commentator recommended a **pope and a pimp** as apt substitutes. But I wonder whether that, too, isn't a judgment trap. I'm still not peering within my own heart, when I'm rummaging around through a cast of characters in search of some other *really bad sinners* to play the leading roles. Distancing myself from them *and* God in the process. This quandary reminds me of a recent UCC Daily Devotional piece written by Illinois pastor Lillian Daniel. It goes like this:

I am tired of hearing people say stupid things in the name of Christianity.
I am tired of nutty pistol-packing pastors who want to burn the Koran.
I am tired of televangelists who claim that natural disasters are the will of God.
I am tired of Christians who respond to the pain of disease with a lecture about behavior.
I am tired of preachers who promise prosperity.

I am also tired of people who say that they are privately spiritual but not religious.
I am tired of people who have one bad experience with a church and paint the whole of Christianity with that brush.
I am tired of celebrities who criticize the church for being patriarchal and homophobic but do nothing to support the churches that are not.

I am tired of people who say they want a church like ours but cannot be bothered to attend one.

And I am tired of people who criticize churches like ours and go somewhere else.

... I feel like I live in a society where the stupid and simple in spirituality always trump the depths of a complex faith.

We are a people of itchy ears, who depart from sound doctrine in favor of easy answers.

Perhaps I am really just tired of myself.

In criticizing others in their faith, I hardly live up to the best in my own faith. Perhaps the people who irritate me the most are exposing my own false doctrines.¹

The first time I read this reflection through, I found myself getting riled up. “Yeah, me too!” I exclaimed in my head after each sentence. “I’m sick of that too!” “I’m tired of those kinds of people too!” Only to run up against those last few sentences and have my own judgments turned around on me...yet again. Oops. Guess I’m a self-righteous finger pointer too. And *my* brand of arrogance is as unbecoming and divisive as anyone’s.

One of my final seminary classes was a course on alcoholism and addiction. The professor wisely made sure we could not fall into the Pharisee’s trap. The whole way through, we were forced to monitor **our own reactions** to the material, to look at **our own** family dynamics and histories, to insert **ourselves** into the case studies. But even all those safeguards didn’t stop me from trying to distance myself, I discovered when I had to attend an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting as part of a class assignment.

As I drove to the meeting, I was nervous and self-conscious. What if I saw someone I knew there? What if they mistook *me* for an alcoholic?...Well, in the end, the women at the meeting were so open and welcoming that I **did** feel like one of them. And, the more they spoke of **their**

¹Daniel, Lillian. “Things I Am Tired Of,” *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional*, October 17, 2010. <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/things-i-am-tired-of.html>.

own pain, struggles, and relationships; I saw kindred spirits and a very fine line. These were sensitive people **like me** who had crossed a line that my own circumstances just **happened** to steer me clear of. **My sobriety**, I learned, was less a badge of honor than a fluke. I returned home that day profoundly humbled and grateful.

And yet, no matter how profound, it's a lesson I have to learn over and over again. The moment I see my own brokenness clearly and experience humility, the process begins all over again. The humility itself becomes a point of pride and a measuring stick. Yet another trap.

So where do we go from here? With such deep divisions between peoples today--nations, political parties, religious factions--we need answers now more than ever. We can learn a thing or two from the tax collector and AA. **Keeping the focus on God** is key. If all our capabilities and accomplishments point back toward the giver of life and grace, there is **no room for comparisons**, unfavorable or otherwise. **It's not about us.**

And yet it is. Perhaps equally important is remaining open and cognizant of what it is we ultimately **share** with one another and all people: Our humanity, our brokenness, our desire for love and approval. A sense that, in the grand scheme of things, we're "okay." We can only do **our own** healing work, with God's help. But, while we're at it, we **can** replace **competition** and **condemnation** with **compassion**. And see where that takes us. We just might discover that our passions, our hopes and dreams, have a whole lot more in common than we think.

And just one more thing. Within the parable, we don't learn what happened to the tax collector after he returned home justified. But we'd like to assume that, out of his gratitude and healing, he

was moved to action. And specifically on behalf of those whom he and his patron, Empire, had harmed. They are the invisible third character in this story. Many of them poor farmers who could ill afford his price gouging or the luxury of a journey of personal healing. We have them among us still. And our healing will ever be incomplete without theirs. It's about **all of us** and God.