

Proper 25 C Sermon
Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2022

The Things That Divide Us
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⁹[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But 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!’ ¹⁴I 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.”

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Have you ever played the game of opposites? It’s a great game to play with kids as they are developing higher language skills. One person says a word and the second names its opposite. It’s a simple game of dualities. For every point there is a counterpoint; for everything there is its opposite. It’s balanced like yin and yang.

This is a fun game to play with children. The trouble, however, arises when adults play the game, or rather stop playing the game, but continue seeing the world in terms of polarities, in terms of contradictions. When a simple child’s game of opposites—of up-down, left-right, north-south, and light-dark—becomes an adult’s dominant worldview, we begin to run into trouble. Suddenly, the world gets scary. There’s only right and wrong, righteous and damned, saved and lost, insiders and outsiders,

white and black, straight and gay, conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat. Everyone who isn't you, is against you. The world becomes a veritable battleground of me vs. you, of us and them, of angels and demons.

This kind of dualism is a pervasive force in 21st century America. As we prepare for midterm elections in a couple of weeks, you can scarcely turn on the television or radio, or read news or even email without seeing or hearing an example. And you can forget about opening your mailbox entirely! Yesterday alone I got fliers in which one candidate accused the other of being bought and paid for with special interest money and another calling their opponent a liar. These have not been the worst. The Pharisee's prayer could almost be a campaign speech.

"Thank God, I'm not like other people . . . especially not like this guy," he says. "My record speaks for itself! I fast twice a week and I give away 10% of all my wealth . . . thank you that I am not him." Much like some high-profile politicians, the Pharisee in Jesus' parable wants everyone to know that he is the opposite of this tax collector who colludes with the Romans and overcharges his own people to fill his pockets. And yet, the tax collector in the parable doesn't seem like a nasty person. He stood away from the crowd, looked down at his feet and prayed, "God, have mercy on me a sinner."

Jesus is a master storyteller and what he does here is nothing short of brilliant. It's an elaborate trap for the hearer and most hearers get caught. You see, the Pharisee judges the tax collector and justifies himself, but we, the hearers, come to judge the Pharisee, and justify the tax collector. But, in passing judgement, we become the very one Jesus' tale cautions us against. The Pharisee judges the tax collector, we judge the Pharisee, we become the Pharisee!

A good person is good until they start to judge others against themselves as the standard. This story has a very important, but often missed message: don't judge!

With this simple story, Jesus illustrates just how easily we can fall into the trap of judging others. When we do, we find ourselves defined by what or who we aren't rather than by what or who we are. The world is quickly divided into two—those who meet our expectations and those who do not. The world becomes a compilation of opposites: me and you, us and them, my view and the wrong view, my religion and the wrong religion, my politics and the wrong politics, my relationships and the wrong relationships... The thing is, when we live like this, in a perpetual state of judging others, we can't be happy. We can't appreciate diversity or see beauty. We can't grow because we can't imagine that we could be wrong.

I think judging others like this stunts our growth, stifles our joy, and clouds our perspective on the beauty the world holds and the beauty our neighbors can share with us. Author Paulo Coelho tells this story:

A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. The next morning while they were eating breakfast, the young woman saw her neighbor hanging the washing outside. "That laundry is not very clean; she doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better laundry soap." Her husband looked on, remaining silent. Every time her neighbor hung her washing out to dry, the young woman made the same comments. A month later, the woman was surprised to see a nice clean wash on the line and said to her husband, "Look, she's finally learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her this?" The husband replied, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows."¹

And so it is with life... What we see when watching others depends on the clarity of the window through which we look.

¹ Paulo Coelho. "10-Second Reading: The Laundry Is Not Very Clean," Paulocoelhoblog.com, <https://paulocoelhoblog.com/2014/04/04/10-sec-reading-the-laundry-is-not-very-clean/>.

Life is not a game of opposites. Morals and people and politics, and religion, race, and relationships—these are not part of a cosmic game of opposites. Life is infinitely more complex than that and to judge others by a simple rubric of our personal interpretation of right and wrong, good and bad, is to limit the extent to which we can interact positively with our neighbors and our world. It makes the world scary. It makes the human spirit small. It makes life miserable and it keeps us from working together, from positively affecting change, from appreciating beauty, from living fully and well.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a simple story and its moral is equally simple, but it's not "be like the tax collector." It's "don't judge the Pharisee." May we not judge ourselves or one another. Amen.