

## PROPER 25, PENTECOST 20, YEAR C, OCTOBER 23, 2022

I enjoy reading thrillers and crime novels. I also like watching the same kind of TV shows but I really like true crime stories because of the way they present the cases. Usually, the prosecutors case is laid out first detailing all the evidence that absolutely convinces you that the defendant is guilty. Then the defense has their opportunity to counteract everything that's been presented and all of a sudden you realize it's not as clear cut as you would think. The realization hits that the evidence presented is not as black and white as you first thought. And it is always fascinating to me how each side has its supporters that are absolutely convinced beyond a shadow of doubt that the other side is wrong. In these situations most everyone is divided into two groups those for the victim and those for the accused.

When you think about it, it really is a microcosm of what life is like. We are always dividing ourselves into groups. You've got your "Good Guys," and your "Bad Guys". Heros and Villains. Idols and Scoundrels. It seems that we are always trying to divide people into two groups: "US" - the group we are in, people we feel similar to, comfortable with and trust; and "THEM" - the people we don't understand or want to associate with because they are not like "us."

Jesus was well aware of this tendency we have to pre-judge, stereotype, and pigeon-hole people. He told many stories, or parables in which he tries to jolt us into seeing things differently, as in the parable we heard today - the one about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector who went to the temple to pray.

Those hearing Jesus tell this parable back in the first century would have initially assumed that the Pharisee was the Good Guy, and the Tax Collector the Villain. We with 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes who have grown up in the church have been taught the Pharisees are the bad guys. But let's assume this is the first century and you're hearing this story for the first time. You know both Pharisees and Tax Collectors. Oh sure, Pharisees could be a bit stuck-up and pompous, but after all they were really religious, and strived to do the right thing so that had to count for something in God's eyes, especially when compared to a Tax Collector - the lowest of the low. Tax Collectors wouldn't have been all that bad, if the money they collected didn't go to the Roman Empire and was used to do something useful, but usually they extorted more than was asked so they could keep a big chunk of what they collected to line their own pockets, and so they were despised.

The Pharisee prays first. "Thank you God that I am not like that awful Tax Collector over there," and the crowd nods in agreement - thank goodness that "we" are not like "them." Then we overhear the Tax Collector's prayer. "Forgive me God for I am the worst of all sinners." The crowd may have been surprised to hear the Tax Collector make this confession, but in spite of that they were probably thinking to themselves, "your damn right you're a sinner and "God shouldn't forgive him. He doesn't deserve it," and then Jesus throws them the curve ball. "It is the Tax Collector," says Jesus, "who goes home right in the eyes of God, not the Pharisee."

Here we go again. Jesus has it backwards. God smiles on those who are good, like that Pharisee fellow, and like us. But God punishes the sinful, Tax Collectors, and the rest of the scoundrels of the world. Jesus has it all wrong again- doesn't he?

What could Jesus have meant? Could it be that the Pharisee was too self-righteous, too pious, too full of himself? Those Pharisees could be pretty arrogant you

know. The Tax Collector on the other hand was so low, that he had no where to look but up, and so in his despicable state, he sought forgiveness, and he sure needed it. That must be it! Jesus must be saying that we should all be more humble, recognize our need to be forgiven, and ask for God's mercy, like the Tax Collector did. So in this story the Tax Collector must be the Good Guy, and the Pharisee the Scoundrel. Maybe we should be saying, "thank goodness we are not like that self-righteous, pompous, arrogant Pharisee." Right?

Wrong! That would be like falling into exactly the same trap seeing things only in terms of "us" and "them," black and white. Realistically, neither the Pharisee nor the Tax Collector is completely perfect, nor are either of them totally without virtue. The Pharisee is truly devout, not only does he obey the religious laws, but he is even more faithful and generous than he needs to be - and he knows it, and he wants God to know it. The Tax Collector, on the other hand, has been less generous and less devout than he should have been, and he knows it, and he wants God to know it. The virtue of the Pharisee is that he has a strong foundation of faithfulness to build on; he just might not think he needs any help from God. And the virtue of the Tax Collector is that he knows he needs all the help he can get, but can we actually believe he will change, or will he keep on taking advantage of people? Just because he admitted his faults, doesn't mean he will do any better tomorrow. So each of them is a Good Guy, and each of them is a Bad Guy, and maybe that is the point of the parable. Maybe that is where we enter into the story.

If we are honest with ourselves we might see a bit of ourselves in the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, and a bit of each of them in us. Now none of us is perfect. Sometimes we are like the Pharisee, judging others and seeing ourselves as better, more worthy, more acceptable to God. At other times we are like the Tax Collector, knowing our shortcomings all too well, regretting the way we have treated people, realizing our need for God's forgiveness and praying, "God, I need all the help you can give me."

The parable is not about who is good and who is bad, or even who is better - and who is worse. It is about who is open to God's love, grace and forgiveness and who allows that grace to transform them. The real question for the Pharisee, the Tax Collector and for us is this: are we open to God's grace? Are we able to see God's love for us, and for others, and are we able to accept and share that love? God does not ask us to live better than someone else, but to live as best as we can according to our faith, our gifts, and our sense of God's call.

The truth is we all wear both hats, some days the good hat is on top, and other days it is the bad one, but both are a part of our wardrobe at one time or another. The Tax Collector's breast-beating humility is not something we are being asked to emulate - nor is the Pharisee's self-righteousness.

Jesus did not give us a long list of rules to follow in order to make us better people, nor did he try to cajole us into being more humble. Being a good person is more than blindly following the rules, or groveling in self-deprecation. Living as God's children is not just what we show others superficially on the surface of our living, but is something that comes from deep within, and that is what Jesus came to do - to change us from the inside out through love - love we can experience and share - love that forgives and transforms - God's love. Being a follower of Jesus is not about trying to divide the world into us and them, but rather is trying to see a bit of "us" in "them," and to see a bit of

"them" in "us" until we recognize that we are all one - we all need each other - we all need God.

Bottom line, we are not here to prove our worth nor our humility to God, to ourselves or to anyone else - we are here to receive God's grace, to share and to celebrate God's grace, as Jesus did. Hopefully, this love, grace and forgiveness we experience may help us to get past the temptation to put people into the category of "them," and celebrate the "us" that we are all in God's family, especially helping those who are outcasts, or who have been abused to know that they are loved, forgiven and accepted, even when those people are us. So let us be thankful that God loves Tax Collectors and Pharisees alike, because that means God loves each one of us. Amen.