

Sermon, St. David's, Luke 18:9-14, 10/27/2019 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

When we read Jesus' parables today, we hear them differently than his original listeners did. Sounds obvious, but stay with me. To those who grew up in a church or who read the Bible on their own or come to church a couple times a month, "Pharisees" are smug, self-righteous types who are always picking fights with our hero Jesus. But Pharisees at the time were ordinary, respectable people. People like us. The kind of people who go to church, who think about church beyond Sunday morning. Good people. Loving people. The kind of people we want to hang out with. The kind of people we enjoy seeing on Sunday mornings.

When we hear these stories, we will be tempted to distance ourselves from the Pharisees and to align ourselves with Jesus. While being on Jesus' side is always a good thing, as long as we are really on his side and not trying, in the words of Anne Lamott, to make Jesus hate all the same people we do: while we are tempted to see ourselves as different than the Pharisees, when we hear these parables and other biblical tales, understand, saints of St. David's, whom I love: *we* are the Pharisees. You and me.

People who show up to church and try to pray.

We talked about prayer last Sunday, and so did Jesus, in another parable. We talked about persistence in all kinds of prayer. Today, the message has more to do with authenticity.

The Pharisee isn't setting out to be inauthentic. He's a faithful guy who tries not only to do everything right, but to go above and beyond. He prays with his whole body, by fasting. He gives a tenth of his income away as a sign of faith.

But he trips up when he compares himself to others, including the tax collector. We've talked about gratitude lately. As we prepare for Ingathering Sunday next week, as well as our ministry fair, gratitude needs to be at the top of our minds.

But not "Thank you, God, that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector."

I've told you before that you can't pray wrong, but I guess I should amend that. Thanking God because we think we are better than other people is praying wrong.

Why we do what we do matters. Like this Pharisee, we try to be faithful. When you make it to church on Sunday, I'm happy if you check in on social media, because it shows your friends that you are part of this place. But why do you do it? If you think I might be taking attendance and you skipped the greeting line, I suppose that's fine; but if you want to look religious to impress your friends rather than to evangelize them, then check your motivation.

The Pharisee had reason to question the tax collector. Tax collectors complied with the oppressive Roman empire. They were complicit. There are professions today that you look down on in some

way. I'm not going to name any in particular because I would offend someone. As Christians, we are told not to judge others, but we do. We question certain occupations and we question all kinds of things that other people do. One of my least favorite comments is, "Who has time for that?" Who has time to read or watch television or go to the grocery store in person or sleep or go to a movie or go to a basketball game or go to church on Sunday morning. We all, in fact, have exactly the same amount of time, and we spend it differently, and judge each other for that. For what we do and don't do.

The tax collector has an oppressive job. People hate him. He takes their money and gives some of it to Rome and keeps some of it himself. He makes his living by interrupting their meager meal and demanding money. He scares people. They hate to see him coming. I don't want to give you the impression that really, being a tax collector wasn't so bad; that Pharisees were just judgmental jerks. Tax collectors were complicit with the oppressive Roman government.

But unlike the faithful Pharisee, who earnestly tried to live a good life: unlike him, the tax collector does not begin his prayer with, "Thank you, Lord, that I am not like that uptight judgmental privileged Pharisee." Instead, the tax collector doesn't even look up, because that's where he thinks God is. He is humble. And he prays. Not eloquently, but humbly and sincerely.

Why we do what we do matters.

Being authentic matters.

How we live our lives matters. The Pharisee was trying. If you want to know what your priorities are, examine your financial statements. (I used to say examine your checkbooks, but lots of us don't really use them anymore: we do it all online.) Studying our expenses shows us what we value.

The Pharisee valued his religion, spending 10% on others. That is a wonderful thing, and I'm not going to tell you not to do that, especially the week before we're collecting pledge cards. He put his money where his mouth is.

But he's not putting his mouth where his money is. He feels superior to the tax collector. We can do that. We can feel good about ourselves because we are in this room together. We went to church today. We are good people. I believe that's true. I love the people of St. David's. You all are good people, whether you are in this room or watching with us at home or in your hospital room.

But if we decide it stops there, or if we pray, "God, thank you that I'm not like those slackers who are at their kids' sports game this morning," then we are like the Pharisee in that story. We tried, but then we fell short.

Don't be like this Pharisee. Be the kind of Pharisee who prays next to the tax collector, who prays for the tax collector; who invites the tax collector to coffee hour. Check in to Facebook when you're here at church because you are sharing your faith in a broken world, not because you want people to think that you are better than you really are.

We are all sinners. I hesitate to use this language, because it's been used to beat people up. Calling ourselves sinners keeps people from church. We resist this language, because we're not that bad. At least we're not like this Pharisee. Or that tax collector.

In the coming week, I invite you to see yourself in person who irritates you the most. (Even if it's me.) See yourself in someone who annoys you, or who has hurt you, or to whom you feel superior.

And then, think about Jesus. About this parable. About your gifts, that only you have. Think about how you can use your gifts to serve others. Think about how you can use your gifts to reach out to someone you'd rather ignore.

Our country is so polarized right now. Who do you feel superior to? How will you pray for them?