

Pharisees and tax collectors get a lot of attention in our Gospel texts, and after generations of interpretation and familiarity with the stories they appear in, many of us here have likely inherited a caricature of both: the pharisee as an arrogant, self-righteous, inflexible conservative, who Jesus seems to constantly criticize and argue with; and the tax collector, someone of more simple stock, an ordinary man, perhaps, dubiously employed, for sure, but cruelly excluded and peripheralized by his own people. And we likely think this because the tax collector of Jesus' parables is often portrayed as self-aware, and penitent, like the one today – and the tax collector is chosen by Jesus as a dinner companion on more than one occasion.

During Jesus' life, though, these caricatures would not have been the way either group was perceived. At all.

The Pharisees were, in fact, the liberals of the day, the progressives. Their intention was to make Torah observance - holiness and purity before God through the Law - accessible to all people, not just those who'd inherited certain privileged roles or positions within the Temple system.

The Pharisees were a welcomed and respected movement of teachers and disciples of Torah, they self-organized outside of the Temple 'institution' to study together and learn from one another, to break bread together.

Anyone could become a Pharisee, from any family, class, or walk of life, all that was required was a discerned charism for the religious life. And they pushed back against the restrictions and limits and exclusions of the established Temple system of the day, making them very popular among ordinary people.

The pharisees were considered role models, and moral examples - their spiritual practices, such as praying at set times during the day, keeping the sabbath, fasting, and tithing, were the beating heart of the spiritual life.

The pharisees chose to live this life, to hold this 'space', to be an example to others, so their lives might encourage conversion of life in those around them.

During Jesus life, the Pharisees were well-liked and well-respected. They were a movement of lay people, they were not elites, not a part of the traditional ruling class, they were generally popular, beloved people in an otherwise harsh and brutal world.

By contrast, tax collectors represented the harsh and brutal world of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea, and they were universally reviled and despised. Tax collectors were collaborators with the occupying forces of the Roman Empire and by the 1<sup>st</sup> century they had a well-established reputation for being morally untethered in their dealings, they were out to make as much money as possible, regardless of the impact this had on the lives of those around them. It was their *job* to gather up wealth for the Empire, for the hated occupation forces, and they skimmed off the top to build up their own personal fortunes. They firmly sided with Empire. Empire, which was oppressing their own neighbors, making their own neighbors' lives unbearably hard; economic suffering was everywhere and that didn't stop them. And, behind them, backing them up, was the terrible threat of violence from the well-armed, well-resourced military of the Imperial forces.

There was no other group within the Jewish community, in that time and in that region, who could have been held more personally responsible for the ongoing misery, destruction of life, and the ruin of families and livelihoods. Tax collectors would have been seen as irredeemable.

This historical context is really important for us to know if we're going to receive what Jesus is teaching us here. This parable is about so much more than "don't be like the bad guy, the Pharisee, the one who's proud and exalts himself, instead be like the surprising good guy, the tax collector, the one who recognizes he's a sinner and calls out to God for mercy ... "

But this simple interpretation is a tricky one for us to step away from, because it's what we're attuned to look for, not just in a story, but also out in the world: who's the hero, who's the villain? Who are the good guys, who are bad guys. It's nice and simple that way, and it takes no effort at all to reduce folks to either good or bad. And believing deep down we're on the 'good side' is quite satisfying. A quick look at the news or scroll through social media serves up just that – there's us and there's them, us-good and them-bad, heroes and villains. But nothing in life is ever really that simple, and Jesus needs us to be aware of that truth.

Jesus' parable refuses to let us settle into a sloppy, superficial assumption of good vs bad. He intentionally disrupts the 'obvious' narrative, the simple surface-story we often tell ourselves, because the simple story, here, is actually a dangerous one.

Jesus is warning *us*, people of faith, that anyone making the ‘good’ choice, choosing to follow him by cultivating a life of faith, also risks distorting the very life of faith they’ve chosen by misunderstanding why they’ve chosen it, and what a life of faith is *for*. A life of faith isn’t to be chosen so we might be rendered ‘good,’ so we might believe ourselves to be good, so we might be perceived as good – and, in our ‘goodness’ be set apart from all those others who have made other choices, ‘bad’ choices, and are therefore, themselves bad.

Believing we’ve chosen the right life, and ‘they’ have not, believing we’re good and they’re bad puts distance between us, and is a grave theological mistake. The religious life can be, and is, a most divisive weapon in the hands of anyone who forgets, even for a moment, that the religious life is intended to bring us together, is for relationship, with God and one another; it is not a way for any of us to claim righteousness or the moral high ground.

This is a teaching that has gone unheard by so many since the church itself came into being, and remains tragically and destructively unheard by far too many today.

Jesus told this parable to folks who trusted in themselves that they were righteous by their good choices and so felt justified regarding others with contempt.

Jesus’ parable is a clear warning against the danger, the evil even, of self-righteousness, and it’s a teaching for the ages, and it’s an essential teaching for all people who have chosen a life of faith.

As St. Ben's, just like the much-beloved Pharisees during Jesus' time, we gather regularly for worship, for spiritual practice, and for prayer so we might make God's transforming and liberating presence accessible and available to all people. We look to spiritual practice to develop our lives in Christ, some of us may fast and observe a weekly sabbath, many of us may pray daily, may tithe faithfully, these practices are still the beating heart of the spiritual life. We study scripture together and learn from one another; we break bread together. These things are wonderful, and they are good, but they do not make us good.

Righteousness is a gift of grace, not something we earn or deserve as 'good Christians,' however faithful we may consider ourselves to be. Our life of faith, as Christians, is not our purpose, our life of faith *is* so that new life in Christ for all *may be*.

... because *all* people are made in the image of God.

All people are worthy of respect and honor, *because* all people are created in the image of God. And *all* people have the potential within them to respond to the love of God; and *all* people can be set free from the power of evil, sin, and death.

This is what is truly good, unquestionably good; and this is the Good News, and *this* must be why we are here, why we do what we do, *this* must be why we choose to live this way.

The Good News is what's good, undeniably and irrefutably good, and that's what's good about why we are church, and that should be the only reason why we choose to live this good life of faith.