

"The Good, the Bad, and Who's Godly?"
Jeremiah14:7-10,19-22; Ps84:1-7; 2Tim4:6-8,16-18;
Luk18:9-14 (23Oct16)

Today we rejoin the Revised Common Lectionary. After fruitful and pleasant byways through oceans and with animals and amid storms and across the universe, we're once again re-entrenched in sad realities of humanity, readings brimming with issues of arrogance and shame and exclusion.

Now, you may not feel you need to have these tendencies pointed out to you since, you've got American democracy, which has seemed intent on highlighting the very worst possibilities of gloating and blaming and fostering divisiveness and refusing to be humbled or shamed. But we're likely not looking to politicians as our examples (tragic though that may be), so maybe it is worth re-grounding ourselves in these Bible readings.

It strikes me that there are sort of four quadrants or types in the mix of characters today. There are wrongly proud and rightly proud, and rightly humble and wrongly humble.

Let's begin with the glaring example: the wrongly proud, namely the Pharisee in our Gospel reading, as he is boasting about his devotions and comparing himself not only favorably but superlatively over others. He could use the elementary school reminder that when you point a finger at somebody, three fingers are pointing back at you.

A couple obvious notes about him: First, he was not doing a bad thing, but was trying to claim extra credit for a good thing. Our spiritual practices aren't to earn us points. We don't pray so we can use it as a bargaining tool. We don't come to church as leverage to convince God we're better than others.

Even tithing, that the Pharisee returned 10% of his income, is a good and worthwhile

devotion. He's not hoarding. He's helping sustain the religious institution. He understands that what he has isn't simply his earning to be disposed with as he likes but is shaped by his connection to God and the community. During this time when we attend more directly to our giving and financial devotion, I'm certainly not going to tell you that being intentional and committed about how much you give is wrong. But I will remind you it's about your faith practice and about the good of this community. As I suspect you already know, the return on your investment here is much more delight and joy than something to be held over others.

Which brings us to the other thing to notice about the wrongly proud Pharisee: He has himself awfully convinced that he's better, that the tax collector couldn't possibly fast or give 10% of his income (much less 11%!). In self-exaltation, he refuses to see others as anything but negative, as "thieves, rogues, and adulterers."

That's the risk for us and the trap we fall into when we only think how terrible others are. In another phrase of Jesus, you end up seeing the speck in your neighbor's eye but fail to see the log in your own. With the 8th Commandment, Luther's Small Catechism reminds us that not bearing false witness means we "do not tell lies about our neighbors ...or destroy their reputations. Instead we come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light." Whew! Such reflection is so continuously important, partly because it's so challenging. It's not just presidential candidates, but we also need to work on perceptions of situations from ex-spouses to violence in the Middle East, from people who are criminals to those who annoy us.

A small story: this week when I went to the hospital to visit Ken Johnson, the staff stopped me at the door and told me to wait down the

hall so they could do their stuff for him first. After half an hour, I was out of time and they still hadn't allowed me in. Feeling snubbed, I was hot under the collar even after my bike ride up to church. I was frustrated that they were dismissing my pastoral role and disregarding the spiritual care I was trying to bring. I was sure that I was in the right and they were neglecting to understand how right I was, even though I didn't pause to consider the good they were offering Ken. I'm hoping there's some gray area, that I'm not just like the Pharisee in wrongful pride and self-assessment, but may also have characterized my role rightly.

That uncertainty points us toward the next quadrant, the rightfully proud, possibly exemplified in the reading from 2nd Timothy. The author has done everything right—he's "fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith," and is expecting to be judged as worthy of a "crown of righteousness." His attitude may not be apparently very different from the egocentric Pharisee, except perhaps that the writer of 2nd Timothy isn't trying to disparage others. That might be enough. Or maybe also where the Pharisee elevated himself over others, causing separations, in the case of 2nd Timothy *others* excluded *him*. He felt like an outcast, deserted by those he expected to count as supporters. Indeed, in the verses that the lectionary bypasses, he names others who have left to work elsewhere or have somehow disappointed him.

It's a hard line to determine; there are lonely martyrs from time-to-time, those who take a hard stand for the right thing even when nobody else is willing to stand with them. But if we've got no community standing beside us and are against the whole world, we probably should be pretty careful about who or what we're resisting and how our motives or convictions are formed.

With that feeling of abandonment or oppression, we may move from the rightly proud to the wrongly humbled or ashamed. There may be an edge of example in the Pharisee's prejudice against the tax collector. Partly since we have a better sense of self-esteem than when our Bibles were written, this is a category we need to be aware of. We have come to realize that hierarchical powers label others with great detriment. Women and those without white skin have been told they're not as good. Gender identity or sexual orientation can become marks to make people feel ashamed, as if there's something wrong with you.

Or here in church: even if you don't know the words for the liturgy or where to find things in the hymnal, if you're a child who has been told to be quiet or a young person who hasn't been fully embraced, if you've wondered if you're wearing the right clothes or others are looking at you out of the corners of their eyes, then you might know some of this wrongful shame, the place imposed on the tax collector by the Pharisee. To be shamed (by another) is wrong.

On the other hand, to be ashamed yourself may be right. We can still feel the force of this parable from Jesus because we might always want to claim excuses and exceptions for ourselves. But we have to notice that the tax collector wasn't claiming something better for himself. It was wrong of the Pharisee to put him down, but it wasn't irrational for the tax collector to feel shame; he was an agent doing the dirty work of the ruling oppressive empire, taking wellbeing away from others by confiscating their livelihood.

Just as I'd hope we as religious people trying to be faithful aren't equivalent with the wrongly proud Pharisee, neither should we equate that ancient tax collector with the IRS. Rather, we should see ourselves in him,

pondering where we are agents of harm and oppression, collaborating with rotten and unjust systems, asking why we ought to feel shame. Maybe for all of our items labeled "Made in China," we should hang our heads and beat our breasts. Maybe he felt humiliated because he wasn't able to change or escape the destructive system.

Or maybe his humility wasn't because he was a tax collector but that he had yelled at his family or been grumpy and pessimistic about the news or had cheated on his diet. Or maybe it was like the section I was reading again this week from Pope Francis' ecojustice encyclical that said, "we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy...more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights" (2, V, 90). Maybe it was the very basic note that the tax collector didn't need to count himself as better than others that enabled him to go home, as Jesus says, in right relationship with God and opens up God's potential for his life.

Another perspective of being rightly humbled is in the words from Jeremiah. We only get a snippet of this stunning passage. The chapter begins by saying that these words were concerning a drought. Clearly the people were mourning and lamenting the drought, yearning for some rainfall. It says the farmers are dismayed (v4) and, in a heart-wrenching detail, that "even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn because there is no grass" (5).

I find it remarkable that this ancient biblical story attributed the ill effects of weather and dire results of a changed climate to the people's bad behavior. Compared to their superstitions, our scientific understanding of our behavior and witnessing the catastrophe we are causing should certainly give us their sense that "our

iniquities testify against us" in Jeremiah's language and to "acknowledge our wickedness." That would be honest shame and being righteous humility.

For all of this being about our attitudes and self-perception, we must close with a life-giving word on God's attitude and perception of you. The most stunning word of these readings today came in the middle of the Jeremiah passage: "Yet you, O LORD, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name." Even recognizing the wreckage they'd caused their society and environment couldn't disrupt that core identity, and maybe it even contributed to their repentance and desire to do better.

This is your prime identifying mark. You are not known for the supposedly pious things you strive to do, not in the credit you claim you deserve, the accolades puffing your chest or the awards put on your shelf. You are not identified by how great you or others think you are. But neither is notoriety in what you do wrong or the marks that threaten to exclude you. And it may well be that in humility or even amid the desperation of shame, you see most fully your identity is secured by God's presence and that you are marked and claimed in the name of the Lord.

That is why we turn to baptism now for Grayson Ward and Harrison Maxwell, to speak God's promise to them that they are claimed and chosen. No matter how they continue to live this out in life, if they go on as well as we anticipate to receive praise and earn trophies or are labeled for some reason as wicked, as outcasts, as rogues and sinners, as lowly and shameful as the rest of us, through it all, they are sons of God, known by God's name, beloved forever, freed and forgiven. Thankful and joyful, let's sing in celebration of this identity.

(Hymn: *Baptized in Water*, ELW 456)

Your mercy is great.

Into your hands, faithful God, we place ourselves and our prayers, spoken and unspoken, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior. **Amen.**

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Set free by the truth of God's gracious love, we pray for the church, the world, and all of God's good creation.

A brief silence.

Only you are righteous, O God. Lead your church to the humility of true repentance so that we reflect your light and truth to the world. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Only you can bring weather we need, as Jeremiah reminds us. Amid beautiful autumn days, fill us with gratitude for harvest and for the colors of the season. We pray for farmers, for migrating birds, and for all creatures preparing for winter. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Only you can judge the nations, O God. Raise up leaders with humble hearts so that your peace spreads across the earth. We pray especially with concern for people in Aleppo, Mosul, Turkey, and all who face violence and insecurity. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Only you can bring healing, O God. Be with all whose hearts ache, who hold out empty hands, who long for forgiveness. Comfort the grieving and heal the sick (*especially Ken Johnson, Eileen Bolstad, Lucetta Kanetzke, and Hollis Rudiger*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Only you can save us. We ask for the assurance of your abiding presence with us through all of our days and especially pray for that blessing at the baptism of Harrison Maxwell and Grayson Ward, and for their parents Chris and Marcie. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Only you know the depths of our hearts, O God. Call this congregation to loving action in your name and open our eyes to what you are doing among us. We pray for the groups gathering to build relationships in our congregation, and for this season as we contemplate how to increase our dedication to your work with our time, talents, and treasures.

and what we name silently and aloud...

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Those who live in your house are happy, O God. Keep us by your grace until we join the saints around your throne. Hear us, O God.