

HOLIER THAN THOU  
Luke 18:9-14; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

My entire elementary education years were fraught with dread. I hated going to school where classmates ridiculed my hearing loss. I was a lackluster student – doing well in English and reading, but I was an abysmal Math student. Report card times were particularly stressful – made doubly bad when my parents would ask me about Virginia Collins’ report card. Known as Ginger, she was the brainy daughter of the headmaster of a nearby Quaker private school, who also happened to be my parents’ closest friends. Good Irish Catholics, Ginger’s mom and Dad wanted her taught by the Dominican sisters – the teaching order for grades 1-12 at Dominican Academy – my alma mater. She joined the class in third grade immediately going to the head of the class, while I floundered in the bottom third of the class.

On rare, exceedingly rare circumstances there would be a test so challenging that we would have to be graded on the curve. On one such test I actually scored higher than Ginger! My grade was far from stellar – probably a C+ or B-. I was waiting for the expected question of Ginger’s grade – but it never materialized. Finally, out of exasperation, I blurted out, “Ginger got a C-!” I will never forget Mom and Pop’s response, “We don’t care how Ginger did; we only care about you!”

My experience reminds me a bit about our Gospel lesson for today, where Jesus tells the story of the Pharisee and Tax Collector praying in the temple. As you heard, the Pharisee nearly broke his arm patting himself on the back with praise for his righteous lifestyle, elevating himself above crooks, evildoers, adulterers, and even tax collectors: fasting twice a week and tithing 10% of his earnings! And Jesus finds fault with the “holier than thou” attitude of the Pharisee!

This is a great parable that lends itself to our identifying with one role or the other or hearing oneself in both people. Which of us has not felt a bit self-satisfied on a Sunday morning? “O Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other people: my next-door neighbor who is enjoying a round of golf right now instead of attending worship; my friend in the other political party who does not understand your will for our nation; or even that scruffy-looking Uber driver sitting two rows over. I am here every Sunday morning and Thursday evening; I pledge faithfully; I serve on three important church committees.” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 4, page 212)

This parable tells us about ourselves as followers of Christ. If it makes us twinge with remorse at the thought of acting like the self-righteous Pharisee, it also inspires us with the humility of the tax collector. It also reinforces the theology of Grace – that we cannot earn forgiveness of our sins – it is a free gift. Justification for our sins comes through God’s reaching out in mercy to helpless sinners.

The word “justification” comes from the ancient Roman law court. In that setting, the judge had the power, even when he knew the accused person was guilty as charged, to pronounce the defendant free anyway. And that, of course, is an essential part of what a pardon does. Behind the idea of justification is the reality that all of us are sinners and are unable to accomplish our own righteousness. God can and does grant us that, however, as an act of his grace and mercy. As miraculous as this is to all, I would venture to guess that most of us here this morning have a rather unremarkable conversion testimony. Does this make yours and my salvation story any less

treasured or real? Absolutely not. It can, however, lead to a sense that we have never been as depraved as the drug addict or incarcerated person who comes to know Christ. Jesus' point is that it can be very seductive for you and me to trust in ourselves that we are righteous and to regard others with contempt, which is exactly what the parable illustrates – the upstanding “pillar of the church” Pharisee as opposed to the “down and outcast” tax collector.

There's no reason to assume that this tax collector is a particularly *spectacular* sinner. If he were a thief, a rogue or an adulterer, Jesus would say so. It's much more likely that he is confessing a set of secret, hidden faults — a collection of oversights, errors and miscalculations that only he would know. So, the above-average Pharisee boasts, while the sin-sick tax collector says, “My bad.” They both make a connection with God, right? Wrong!

In a surprising twist, Jesus concludes the parable by saying, “I tell you, this [tax collector] 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” (v. 14).

The tax collector restores his relationship with God by asking for forgiveness, while the Pharisee moves farther away from God by boasting of his righteousness. This isn't what the hearers of the parable expect. They've been taught that good behavior draws you closer to God, while bad behavior drives you away.

One of my favorite books is “Letters to a Young Doubter” by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. The following quote comes from this book and speaks directly to this parable of Jesus. “I think self-righteousness is the bane of human relations, of all of them – interpersonal, international and interfaith. I'm sure it was self-righteousness that prompted Pascal to say, “Human beings never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” Self-righteousness blocks our capacity for self-criticism, destroys humility, and undermines the sense of oneness that should bind us all.

Self-righteousness inspired the Christian Crusades against Muslims and, centuries later, the Easter pogroms of Eastern Europe, the sermon-induced slaughter of Jews after the morning celebration of the resurrected rabbi...”

Over the years I have been convinced that the more important question is not who believes in God, but in whom does God believe. Rather than claim God for our side, it's better to wonder whether we are on God's side. Sobering thought, isn't it?

I believe we saw a present-day living example of this parable this past week. John MacArthur is a pastor and author known for his internationally syndicated Christian teaching radio program Grace to You. He has been the pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, since February 9, 1969. Last week during the Truth Matters Conference at Grace Community Church, MacArthur took part in a panel discussion and was asked to give a “pithy” response to a word mentioned by the moderator. The word given was “Beth Moore,” to which MacArthur replied, “Go home.”

He then elaborated and said, “There is no case that can be made biblically for a woman preacher. Period. Paragraph. End of discussion.” Later, MacArthur added, “Just because you have the skill

to sell jewelry on the TV sales channel doesn't mean you should be preaching." MacArthur's comments were met by laughter and applause from the audience.

As you can imagine, there has been literally a deluge of equally well-known pastors refuting this statement. Max Lucado "grieved" over MacArthur's "derisive" comments, which included telling popular author Beth Moore to "go home." "Are we, white, male, aged leaders of the church, listening? Are we heeding the message of our sisters in Christ? Are we listening to our astute and capable female Bible teachers? Listening to their longing to minister from a feminine perspective? Listening to their willingness to lend their intellect, energy and passion to the cause of Christ? What wealth of wisdom they bring!" In his response to the controversial comments, Lucado said, "The bride of Christ is sighing."

Moore, a Southern Baptist, is the founder of Living Proof Ministries who grew in influence as a popular author and Bible teacher. In recent years, she has been outspoken in evangelical circles against sexual abuse and misogyny in churches. In a series of tweets on Monday, Moore emphasized that she surrendered to the calling of God, not of man and that she will "follow Jesus... all the way home." Yet, in the midst of this Moore has asked her supporters to refrain from negative responses on social media: After many expressed outrage on Twitter against MacArthur's comments, Moore asked those on social media to "cool it on the slander toward JMac et al.," noting that it "doesn't honor God." She added, "Believe me, you guys, I'm not talking about cooling it on the issues. Misogyny is rampant & shameful. I'm talking about not returning insult for insult. What Jesus called us to do in a case like this is HARD but right." Repeating Sloane Coffin "Rather than claim God for our side, it's better to wonder whether we are on God's side."

I generally stay away from this kind of controversy because I feel like it sensationalizes and distracts us from the teachings of Jesus. I am not here in this pulpit to make a point. I am here because Jesus called me to this work. I don't need to "Go Home!" as John MacArthur told Beth Moore! I Am Home! And I have never felt more at home in any place than when I am spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. I have never felt a need to defend God's hand on my call to ministry - I am however affirming that God can and does call the most surprising and "unqualified" men and women to ministry.

- Moses stuttered.
- David's armor didn't fit.
- John Mark was rejected by Paul.
- Timothy had ulcers.
- Hosea's wife was a prostitute.
- Amos' only training was in the school of fig-tree pruning.
- Jacob was a liar.
- David had an affair.
- Solomon was too rich ... Jesus was too poor.
- Abraham was too old ... David was too young.
- Peter was afraid of death ... Lazarus was dead.
- John was self-righteous.

- Naomi was a widow.
- Paul was a murderer ... So was Moses.
- Jonah ran from God.
- Miriam was a gossip.

And don't forget Rahab, Mary the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan Woman, and the women at the foot of the cross who announced the Resurrection of Jesus that first Easter morning! These are only a few of those unlikely persons in the Bible called by God to spread God's word!

One of our past Bishops, Joe Pennell taught the preaching class the year I was at Licensing School in 2000. He told us that we were to preach with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. We are to look at current events through the lens of Jesus' teachings, and our Gospel lesson for this week has the perfect response to this controversial event. How utterly ironic that I find myself speaking to Biblical validation for women in the pulpit on this last Sunday of Clergy Appreciation month!!

Bottom line? Never mistake religiosity (the quality of being very religious, which usually involves extreme zeal outside of and beyond the norms of one's faith) for holiness. In closing are some words I invite you to ponder in the coming week. They come from a devotional by Debie Thomas: "A Light to See By." *Journey with Jesus* for August 6, 2017. "I came across a C.S Lewis quote this week that stopped me in my tracks: 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen; not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'

For reasons I'm still puzzling out, the quote is feeding my soul. I've spent a long time now moving away from a version of Christianity I can no longer affirm in good faith –Christianity as certitude, Christianity as fundamentalism, Christianity as a rabbit's foot, securing my safety and good fortune. All the while, I've tried to find an essential core that I can still hold, and that will hold me. I wonder now if C.S. Lewis's analogy is that core. What would it be like to accept Christianity, not primarily as a set of doctrinal claims, but as a lens? As a means of seeing? If my faith became my eyes, my light source, my sun, what sort of reality could I live into?

At every point, Christianity calls us to hold together truths that seem bizarre, counterintuitive and irreconcilable. Die to live. Pardon in order to be pardoned. Bless those who persecute you. And yet these seeming contradictions are what give the religion credibility and verisimilitude (authenticity). If I live in a world that's chock full of contradiction, then I need a religion robust enough and complex enough to bear the weight of that messy world. I need a religion that empowers me, in Richard Rohr's beautiful words, 'to live in exquisite, terrible humility before reality...'” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Amen!