

October 23rd, 2022

Year C: Proper 30 (Luke 18:9-14)

We all know what the big difference between dogs and cats is, don't we? I have a little cushion on my chair to remind me (*Dogs have owners; cats have staff*). The reason for this, of course, is that your dog thinks you must be wonderful, because you look after it. Your cat, on the other hand, thinks that because you look after it, IT must be wonderful.

The Pharisee in today's gospel was being a cat. When he stood before God, he congratulated God on having made him so wonderful. He saw himself as one of God's best pieces of work, and he was really impressed by himself. He sounds as if he wasn't standing before God, so much as God was standing before him! And when he had finished congratulating himself – nice and loud so that everyone could hear – he went back home feeling even more good about himself.

The tax collector, on the other hand, saw himself as God saw him, and he wasn't impressed with himself at all. He knew what he was, and he freely admitted it. He even felt bad about it – so bad that he had gone to the temple to pray for mercy.

So, the Pharisee was an arrogant stuffed-shirt, who thought he was better than the tax-collector, because he did all the right things, whereas the tax collector was a wretched sinner, who didn't do any of the right things.

The Pharisee and the tax collector are pretty well-established stereotypes in the gospels. Jesus didn't approve of either group. He called on them both to change their ways, and he had some converts in each group. There were ex-tax collectors among his followers, including the apostle Matthew, and he had some Pharisee sympathizers – like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – even if they did keep their allegiance pretty quiet.

Jesus had a long-running feud with the Pharisees. Right from the beginning of his ministry, the Pharisees had devoted a lot of energy into thinking of ways to shut Jesus up. On his part, Jesus openly – and often – accused the Pharisees of having perverted the Jewish religion, and of being the worst kind of hypocrites. They collaborated with the Roman occupiers, and acted as their agents in many ways.

On the one hand, this collaboration did keep the peace and save a lot of conflict - and lives. That's probably how it started out. They probably thought that if they cooperated with the occupiers instead of resisting them, they would be able to live in peace. That's not bad reasoning, but, as always, the problem is knowing where to draw the line. When does keeping the peace through collaboration turn into victimizing their own people and undermining their own beliefs? It's always a tough question, but Jesus thought they had crossed that line a while ago.

And what about the tax collectors? Well, they **also** collaborated with the Roman occupiers, but it's much harder to find any justification for their motives. They had no compunction about victimizing their own people. Perhaps some of them thought that they were a bit less vicious, and at least they didn't pretend to be speaking for God. They were crooks, no question.

We do rather expect that if Jesus tells a story with either a Pharisee or a tax collector in it, then they are BOTH going to be villains. In this story, however, the tax collector is apparently a better person than the Pharisee.

So, is the point of the story is that it's better to be honest about being dishonest than to pretend to be better than you are? Well, maybe. But perhaps, like last week's simple story, it's a bit more complicated than that.

First of all, to be fair, the Pharisee did have some justification for thinking that he was a better person than the tax collector – because he was! He did all the right things; he prayed and fasted; he gave to charity. The tax collector was just a crook, who did none of those things.

Compared to the tax collector, the Pharisee **was** a pretty good citizen. The way the story is told, however, he seems to be doing all the right things, not because he cared, but because it made him look good. So, is it bad to do right thing for the wrong reason? Surely it's better to do the right thing for the wrong reason, than not to do the right thing at all because you can't do it for the right reason?

A starving man might prefer that you fed him out of genuine concern, instead of doing it to make yourself look good, but feeding him for the wrong reason is still better than not feeding him. Sometimes it doesn't really matter why you do the right things, as long as you do them.

The tax collector admits to being a sinner and feels really bad about it. He even goes to the temple to pray and ask for mercy. But we don't hear him say that he has any plans to change. We don't hear him say that he's going to go home and mend his ways. So, is remorse for not being a good person enough to excuse him? Is it OK to carry on being an awful sinner as long as you feel bad about it, because you're already better than a good person who's pompous about it?

And when we read this story and think about the Pharisee and what a pompous pain he was, and how wrong he was, doesn't that mean that we think we are better than he was? How can we, then, pass judgement on him for his lack of humility?

We have tackled the humility thing quite a lot in our last weeks of reading Luke's gospel. We've already

talked about how people can sometimes be really proud of their humility, without realizing that the one cancels out the other!

Not so many years ago, there was a well-known and popular politician in Ontario who made a point of getting out of his chauffeur-driven stretch limo a few blocks away from any rally he was attending, so that he could make his arrival, humbly, riding on a bicycle. Such exaggerated humility is really only a different way of being pompous.

Usually, when we come to the end of a parable, we know quite clearly which of the characters in the story we want to be like. In this parable, Jesus tells us that the tax collector went away from the temple “more justified” than the Pharisee. So, are we to be like the tax collector?

Saying you’re sorry for sinful ways, even if you do it every week, or even every day, is better than never admitting them, but not much. Confessing and regretting a sin that you fully intend to carry on doing is not exactly sincere. So, no, we don’t want to be the tax collector until we know what he did next. But we don’t want to be the Pharisee either.

Perhaps that is the point: to see what they both were doing wrong. After all, God designed the human body so that it is impossible for us to pat our own backs, and it is also impossible to kick ourselves in the butt!

God is our owner, not our staff, (or our vending machine). When God blesses us and cares for us, it is because God is wonderful, not because we are. Amen.