

Sermon for Proper 25C
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"God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." So said the Pharisee.

Because we know the punchline of this parable, I wonder how many of us hear this and then think: "God, I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee, putting other people down." Right? But let's stay with this Pharisee, because probably we're a lot more like him than we'd like to admit.

Pharisees were the "good people." They were law-abiding and followed the rules. They attended synagogue and prayed and gave alms. They were educated and privileged. A lot like us. We're "good" people. Probably most if not all of us pay our taxes and vote, we return books to the library maybe even on time, we obey laws and respect relationships and yes, pledge to the church and give to charities. Many of us help others in need, volunteer, take care of ill friends and family, go the extra mile. We're not the obvious thieves, rogues, adulterers or oppressors. And yet.

We all have "others" in our lives. "Those people"—the people that we fear or mistrust or are uneasy around. The people that we, let's be honest, look down on. We have been culturally conditioned—even over generations—to fear and not value Black people and indigenous people and many many kinds of immigrants. Our nation and states have policies that have kept Whites separate from these "others" and placed extra burdens on them. We've also been taught through rhetoric, news reporting, and media, to fear and despise drug users, prostitutes, "Welfare queens," the poor, the less educated, homeless people, especially since many of these are also Black, indigenous or immigrants. And we turn a blind eye to the powerful people and policies that put people in these situations and keep them there. "Others."

But you may have your own "others," people that make you uncomfortable or fearful because of your own experiences or upbringing. People you'd rather dismiss or avoid. Maybe someone with mental illness or addiction who treated you badly. Someone from another culture or country or faith who spoke or acted in ways that unsettled or hurt you. Maybe even someone from a different part of the country or wealth bracket or political views that you couldn't agree with at all. So you kind of decide that they are lacking, and really not as good or worthy as you.

Who are those "others" for you? Be honest. We all have them. And we live in White culture that deals with "others" by demonizing them and avoiding them. That's what we're trained to do. But that's not very helpful. It's not honest, and it's not of God.

Jesus criticizes the Pharisee in this parable because he is not honest before God, and he bases his relationship to God on his good works and his privilege. He is not honest, because we are all

beloved of God and all in need of God. He and all those he named. And God's favor never depends on our good works but on God's love. We don't fast or pray or give because then God will like us; we fast and pray and give because they are habits that nurture our faith and our relationship to God. Finally, faith that is only about ourselves is dead. If we have no compassion for those around us, how can we call ourselves disciples of Christ? Faith is not a zero sum game—some people are “saved” and an equal number “go to Hell.” Faith in God is about knowing ourselves all to be connected, in the same boat, needing God together, needing each other and caring for each other.

The tax collector is the “bad person.” He is a tool for the Roman Empire, preying upon his own people and keeping extra money for himself. He was rightly despised by many Jews. And yet, in this parable, he stands in the temple and says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He is honest; he knows that what he is doing is wrong. He knows that he doesn't merit God's love, but asks for it anyway. That one, says Jesus, is justified before God.

This is not a call to beat ourselves up and put on a martyr act before God. The 1979 Prayer Book took out the phrase “miserable offenders” from the Confession and rightly so. But we are called to right relationship with God and with others. That is, to know and live deeply into the knowledge and belief that we are as beloved and as forgiven as everyone else. Conversely, that everyone else, even “those people” that we tend to ignore, put down, or despise are AS BELOVED AND AS FORGIVEN as we ourselves.

Now, we can't just wave a magic wand and make all our prejudices go away—blip! suddenly I don't fear or mistrust all these people I've been indoctrinated against my whole life. But maybe, if I take my Christian faith seriously, maybe if I marinate in God's love and graciousness, maybe if I pray earnestly to have my heart opened, there is a way to move out of my fear and grow in love towards others. We have been taught to cut off and demean “others.” What if the Way of Jesus is to nurture curiosity, respect and compassion towards those different from us? What if, after the initial knee-jerk reactions of fear or distaste, we can regroup and act differently? Wonder who the person really is? What life experiences got them here? What stories they have? What strengths and gifts have allowed them to survive? What if?

When I returned to Massachusetts after my father died, I had the chance to live in the first CRECHE house. CRECHE means “Charles Rives Episcopal Co-Housing Endeavor” and it is run by Isaac Everett, an Episcopal priest who believes that we are meant to live together in community. I joined the house and 5 other people and I became the “other.” It was a queer community, and I was historically hetero, which was fine with me, but I really didn't understand what it was like to be queer in a heterodominant society. There were many aspects of living there that were uncomfortable, because I had a lot of learning to do. One of my housemates was non-binary, and I got their pronouns wrong often. Another was legally blind and very outspoken about what was annoying and demeaning to her as a person with a disability. One was a Black lawyer who more than once took me to task for my unconscious racism. All of which was super helpful in my school of life and faith, but it certainly took me down a notch or two in my own high esteem.

More than that, though, I got to hear their stories and understand their lives in a way I wouldn't in casual conversation. One housemate was a devout gay Mormon, which blew my mind. Another had terrible trauma in her past and was deeply estranged from her family. The non-binary housemate's parents refused to use their chosen name and pronouns, something that caused them on-going heartache. I got to see their unique gifts and struggles, and I shared mine with them. We had conflicts and hurt feelings; we were able to celebrate and console one another. When the house moved, I chose not to go with it, and then moved down to Fall River. But I am grateful to have had the chance to be opened and stretched by these beloved children of God.

What I am saying is, we can change. We are not doomed to fear and mistrust people forever. We can grow our capacity to love and accept others. Just think: the Episcopal Church used to deny ordination to plenty of "others"—women, queer people, people with disabilities—and now they/we are allowed. Or should I say celebrated? I hope that's the case!

Who are your others? Who in your life and community makes you uncomfortable or fearful? Maybe this is an opportunity to have our lives and compassion expanded. Maybe we can learn from others and have our lives enriched by them. Let us stand in prayer in humility before God, thanking God for God's unmerited love and boundless forgiveness. For ourselves. For others. Amen.