

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC    October 27, 2019**  
**30th Sunday of Year C    Luke 18:9-14**

In the early days of Western movies in Hollywood, it was easy to distinguish the “good guys” from the “bad guys:” the “good guys” wore white hats and the “bad guys” wore black. The triteness of that cliché does not prevent us from doing pretty much the same thing. We are rather adept at lumping people into general categories according to our superficial observations about them. We too dress people in white hats and black; we decide who is the hero who the villain. In this morning's parable, Jesus speaks subversively suggesting that things are not as they appear to be. For Jesus, it is the despised tax collector who now wears the white hat, and the self-righteous Pharisee who wears the black, but why?

It is not that what the Pharisee has said is untrue. We can presume that he has indeed performed all those good deeds he said he has. The Pharisee's mistake is that he has not said enough. He has not looked deep enough into himself to tell the full story of his life. With his rose-colored glasses, he has filtered out all the shadows of his life, all those characteristics and tendencies of his personality that he is unwilling or unable to acknowledge, and to accept as part of who he really is. Jesus hints at how foolish it is to claim that one's life can be so neat, so well ordered, just so perfect. The tax collector, on the other hand, may have sinned, but at least he is honest with himself. He is not afraid to confront the shortcomings of his life, the things about which he is very much ashamed. He admits his sin, his failure, and so he, rather than the Pharisee is the one who is open to God's mercy and healing.

The Pharisee on the other hand has settled into a pretty comfortable life wherein he has everything figured out—he thinks—with God, with his neighbor, and with himself. The Catholic monk and author, Thomas Merton describes the Pharisee in this way “The Pharisee's goodness is preserved by routine and by the individual avoidance of serious risk—indeed of serious challenge. In order to avoid apparent evil, this pseudo-goodness will ignore the summons of genuine good. He will prefer duty to courage and creativity. In the end he will be content with established procedures and safe formulas, while turning a blind eye to the greatest enormities of injustice and uncharity.”

The Pharisee has tried to tie together all the loose ends of his life in one neat bow. In contrast, the tax collector is under no such misapprehension that his life is so well put together. He sees his life in disarray; it's a mess, a train wreck—he admits it. And for Jesus this simple admission, hard though it may be, is the beginning of his salvation, of something new happening in his life. The Pharisee can't admit the truth of

his own situation because he refuses to look at himself. Afraid of what he is unable to handle, he banishes to oblivion all that is unpleasant, unwieldy and contradictory to his self-image. So, the Pharisee is doomed to live a hollow life; he is only a part of what he could be. The Pharisee acts as if he doesn't really need anyone, not even God, as his prayer in the temple betrays. He has himself, his accomplishments, his good deeds, and that is more than enough for him.

Let's return to the gospel now and see the point Jesus is trying to get across by telling this particular parable, and then examine how the religious issue Jesus addressed in His day may still be a problem for us today. St. Luke, records that Jesus was speaking to those "who believed in their own self-righteousness, while holding everyone else in contempt." So, the prayer of the Pharisee betrays a sort of spiritual smugness and arrogance, "I give you thanks, oh God, that I am not like the rest of men." And, here it is, I believe, that we come to the very heart of the problem: namely that tendency we have to write off or dismiss whole groups of people. How often does it happen that we condemn or criticize people who possess personality traits very similar to our own, but ones that do not conform to the image of what we like to present ourselves as being? How often does it happen that we are quick to condemn in others what we fail to recognize in ourselves? How is it that we can have 20/20 vision to spot in others those same faults we are blind to see in ourselves? And why is it that traits and tendencies which we refuse to recognize in ourselves, irritate us so terribly when we notice them in the people around us? Could it be that they are walking, breathing reminders of our own limitations and weaknesses? So, whenever we speak categorically and say, "I don't like people who...;-and you could fill in the "blank," might we really be saying that the quality we don't like about that individual is precisely what we don't like about ourselves, but won't dare admit to or begin to deal with in ourselves? In actuality might we not be revealing more about ourselves than about the ones we are so quick to criticize?

Our task in life is to recognize that it is perfectly human to have all sorts of unwanted feelings and desires, and to develop a certain tolerance towards ourselves for having them, which in turn makes it possible to have a greater tolerance towards others. A spontaneous murderous thought never killed a single human being, but a deep-seated ill will, never acknowledged and buried in the depths of one's heart, can destroy the fabric of any human relationship, despite all the pious rationalizations that are offered to justify one's condemnation of another. The goal is to accept ourselves with all our mixed feelings in the same way that God accepts us. And paradoxically as are able to accept ourselves, we are more able to accept others too. Our prayer then might be that of the poet W.H. Auden who said, "Lord, help me love my crooked neighbor, as I love my crooked self." It is to be open and to acknowledge all the

different sides of who we are, even those sides we are inclined to label as inferior or wrong. These may be the very aspects of our personality that can provide the impetus for growth and change, both spiritual and emotional.

Today's gospel urges us to be introspective, to be like the tax collector who is not afraid of what he finds when he stops to take a good look at himself. For the tax collector, there is hope, there is healing, there is wholeness, there is salvation. For the Pharisee, there is nothing of the kind, because in his conceit and blindness, he sees nothing amiss. Let us pray that we can have eyes to see, that we can love and accept ourselves in the totality of who we are, and thereby learn to accept our neighbors in their totality as well.