

"Disciples Don't Judge" – Luke 18:9-14 – October 27, 2019

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We humans judge others. We make assumptions about other people all the time. We form opinions from the way someone looks, from how someone acts, what they sound like and the various words they use, the places they go, the friends they keep, and a multitude of other categories. Because our brains have been taught to observe and then analyze our findings, we naturally judge all other people. Unfortunately, we are not unequivocally objective. We classify people as either worthy or unworthy based upon opinion, culture, stereotypes, comfort level, feelings, and so much more. We are subjective. And the analysis we make about others is limited by our own perceptions of right and wrong, and good or bad. We do this constantly.

Even this morning, when each of us saw kids dressed up in their Halloween costumes coming into the sanctuary for worship, you formed an opinion about it. Maybe you were shocked, because, in your understanding, that is inappropriate dress for church. Maybe you were surprised but delighted, because the kids look absolutely adorable. Or maybe you already knew to expect it, because the Harvest Celebration is after church this morning, and you had read in the Beam and First Notes that we were encouraged to dress in costume. But all of our reactions to seeing people in Halloween costumes are based upon a lifetime of expectations and opinions. Fascinating, isn't it?

Now with all this in mind, let us take a look at the parable from Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that Jesus is speaking to an audience of people who regarded themselves as righteous and looked with contempt upon those who were not. Basically, they were people puffed up about their own goodness and quick to condemn those who didn't measure up.

The parable that Jesus tells appears to be straightforward, yet it closes with a surprising twist. Two men come to the Temple to pray – one is a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Now, to understand how Jesus' audience heard this parable, we have to dismiss what we think we know about these two types of people. We have been trained to think of the Pharisees as the bad guys because they are often presented as opponents to Jesus. Yet actually the Pharisees were what we would think of as moral and upstanding citizens. They would be characterized as dependable, law-abiding, and honest. We would enjoy having them as good neighbors and decent members of society. Worship and prayer and education were important to them. We would welcome them into our community with open arms.

This particular Pharisee in the parable is described as being a solid individual, coming to the Temple to pray. He contributes more than is required of him, and because of this, was probably known to be very generous to those around him. As he is praying in the Temple, he adopts the correct posture, arms and head raised. Everything about him seems right, and he begins to pray. He doesn't ask God for anything but instead offers what sounds like a check list of his good deeds. Now this guy has his life under control and he is pretty content with that. He says, "God I thank you that I am not like the other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

Next is the tax collector. He is described in the parable as standing far off, perhaps even out in the court of the Temple reserved for the Gentiles, even though he is a Jew. He knows he has done wrong. His very profession is wrong. As a tax collector, he earns his living working for the controlling government – that of the Roman Empire. His job required him to pay a set amount to the Romans, and he could collect that money however he wanted. Anything he collected over and above what was due to the Romans was his to keep. To his fellows Jews he was a crook and a traitor.

The tax collector recognizes his guilt and he has come to the Temple with his head bowed down. He is remorseful and weighed down by his sin. In his prayer he doesn't make a promise to change his ways – he's got to earn a living. He simply acknowledges his sinfulness and cries out for God's mercy.

Now remember, to Jesus' audience, the Pharisee is still seen as the upstanding citizen here. He is a good, moral person, gives generously, and isn't anything like that lowlife tax collector, who basically steals money from his own people for a living. Yet Jesus surprises the audience by saying it is the tax collector who goes home justified - that is, he is right with God – he is justified rather than the Pharisee. And then it seems that this parable is some sort of lesson in humility. Jesus states, those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

If that's the case, then all we need to do to be right with God is to be full of humility. Okay. That may not be overly easy, but with practice we can learn how to suppress our pride and not be so boastful about our good deeds. We can humble ourselves before God. We can go about our business, living our moral lives, obeying the law, and doing our good works. Paying our bills on time and donating to charity and whatnot, even turning in our pledge cards by November 10th. All we have to do is not be so full of ourselves, right?

And then we can say, thank goodness I'm not anything like that self-righteous, holier than thou Pharisee.

Oooooops! Now, did you see what just happened? That's the trap of this parable. When we are focused so much on what we do, on our actions, on who we are, whether we're doing good works or trying to be humble, we totally miss the point that Jesus was trying to make. We categorize and assign value to people all the time, without even realizing it. We judge people, assess their worth, on what they do or how they look.

If you want to try an experiment, and it's actually kind of fun, do some people-watching. Go out into the community with no agenda other than to watch the people around you. You could spend some time wandering around the Walmart in Rib Mountain, hang out at the Farmer's Market, sit on a bench on the 400 Block, or visit a hospital waiting room. Maybe go to a sports event, not to watch the game, but to observe the fans. Or sit in on a meal at Primrose or visit an elementary school art class. Just watch people for a while, and intentionally be aware of what your brain does.

Now, I want you to think about what I just said. Even as I was reciting that list of places, your brain was already imagining the type of people you might see. Right? Or maybe it's just my brain.

Thank God, I am not like the morally reprehensible tax collector. Or thank God, I am not like the prideful Pharisee. One or the other? Maybe both, because at times we are both.

So if the message of this parable isn't really about humility, what is it? The Pharisee did all the right things; he was righteous according to the law. The tax collector did all the wrong things, yet he was the one who went home justified. And why is that?

Because even though the Pharisee lived a good life, he was focused on his deeds. Look what I've done, God. See how good I am? Life was good for the Pharisee. He was content. He didn't need God for anything, he didn't rely on God. He believed he was okay, because he lived an okay life. He was blind to his own shortcomings, especially that of judging and devaluing others.

The tax collector was overwhelmed by his sinfulness, and he came to God in confession. He didn't bargain, he didn't say, I'll do this and this and this. I'll change all my bad ways and then I'll be good enough to earn your favor. He came to God vulnerable and repentant and ashamed. He recognized his deep need for God.

The lesson of this parable is there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's love. The tax collector cried out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He didn't try to earn his way into God's favor, because he knew he couldn't. Instead, he simply asked for it. He recognized not only his need for a

right relationship with God, but also that there was nothing he could do to get it. The relationship only comes through acceptance of God's gift of grace.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, was deluded into thinking that he was already in a right relationship with God because he did all the right things. His delusion led him to feelings of superiority and self-assuredness. Yet because of this self-righteousness, he was caught in the trap of disparaging others to make himself look better. Taken to extremes, this can lead to stigmatizing and bullying those who act and think differently. When our opinions about others cause us to devalue them, cause harm to or leave them in harm's way, or infringe upon their rights, then we have a problem. When we define ourselves by who we are against, we have truly missed the mark.

When we focus on the faults of others, we are blind to the faults in ourselves. Certainly, the tax collector made his share of mistakes. We don't have to pretend he didn't. But instead of condemning those faults, we can accept our common humanity. Our value comes not in what we do, but in loving and accepting ourselves as God loves each and every one of us. That is our true worth, not in how we compare with others. We don't increase in value by putting ourselves ahead of someone else.

Our brains will naturally categorize people – the brain is only trying to discover patterns so it can make sense of the world. That's its function. But part of that process is assigning value based upon conditioning we've received throughout our lives. And not all of that has been good.

We have to retrain our brains and become more self-aware. When we do this, retrain our brains, then those scales of relative worth that we try to ascribe to ourselves and to others become absolutely meaningless. We need to spend less time judging the worth of others, and spend more time truly embracing one another and our differences, and standing up for others in the face of oppression and marginalization. When we focus less on where we stand in the grand scheme of things, the more we can focus on sharing compassion and love with one another.