

20th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25C
Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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On first reading, today's parable reminds me of a cartoon picture from a Sunday School book. The arrogant Pharisee stands proudly in the temple with his nose in the air, praying in a smug way. Far away in a corner, there's the sinful tax collector hunched over on his knees, his face streaked with tears, confessing his heart out. The two men seem like caricatures. And the lesson seems simple: don't be arrogant like that Pharisee, be like the humble tax collector who went home justified.

However, it turns out the parable's message is not quite so simple – Jesus was a far more skillful teacher than that. The more time we spend with this parable, the more layers it begins to reveal, and the more it gets under our skin.

First off, it's not so easy to tell who's the bad guy and who's the good guy.

In Jesus' day, it was obvious the Pharisees were *good guys*. They were pillars of society, law-abiding, church-going folks. They were generous and charitable. They walked the walk – especially this man. He prayed not only at services but other times too, fasted twice as often as required, and gave more money than expected. And he was sincerely glad to do it. He thanked God for the opportunity. It's hard to argue with that.

In comparison, tax collectors were definitely *bad guys*. They were slimy extortioners. Tax collectors cheated and stole, overcharged people and sent them further into crippling debt. They were suspicious, unsavory characters— so it was unsettling, even shocking, for this tax collector to even be in the temple. Then he called out to God and was forgiven. Immediately! Another shock. But even as the shock registered, this parable started to work on Jesus' listeners. Because isn't that exactly why people come to worship, to meet God? And this man did meet God. His honest prayer was answered. So why be surprised? God's mercy is for everyone. Something to celebrate, not gripe about. The parable is working to show us it's God's kindness that is truly shocking – not human sin.

And what about the Pharisee? His overachieving goodness might be annoying, but it wasn't harmful. What was harmful is the fact that he *looked sideways* while he prayed, instead of focusing on God. He *looked sideways with contempt* at his fellow humans. Listen to him! “*God, I thank you that I am not like other people.*” Oh really? Who does he think he is then, some other species? He's human too, but he can't see it. To preserve

his pride, he distances himself from that sinner on the other side of the temple, who he lumps together with all the other undesirables, robbers, outlaws, what-have-you. Dismisses them all as worthless. And that *should* be a shock. Is it *shocking enough* to us? He dismisses all these sisters and brothers, siblings cherished by God, just flicks them away. He might love God, but he certainly doesn't love his neighbor. And divorcing those two commandments, separating those two essential loves, will kill the spirit.

What we are witnessing is contempt. And Jesus wants to show us that contempt is not just a harmless character flaw – contempt is fatal to the human family. Contempt destroys human connection. It's hard to imagine a more corrosive attitude.

But Jesus has one final trap to spring in this brilliant parable. Because just as we get good and disgusted by this guy's arrogance, just as we get to thinking, *I hate that kind of judgy person, thank God I'm not like that horrible Pharisee!* -- then the story turns its spotlight on us, and we get it. We realize we are acting exactly like the Pharisee. We're judgy too. We're not immune to contempt. And when Jesus leads us to this point, when we recognize our common humanity with that judgy Pharisee, then we are ready to learn something.

Contempt destroys human connection. Contempt is when we simply write off another person. We are scornful, disgusted, want nothing to do with them.

Contempt is extremely common. Family members watch the news and supply a running commentary, condemning those "good-for-nothing" law breakers, those "worthless addicts" on the streets, writing them off, reinforcing contempt with every word... Two married people unwittingly allow contempt to poison their marriage. They no longer relate to each other with respect – instead, they criticize. They mock and sneer, blame and belittle and demean. They no longer treat each other as valuable human beings. It will be hard to get the love back... Contempt has reached epidemic levels in public life. Opposing worldviews, alternative facts, abrasive accusations, they continue to erode our sense that we belong to each other, that we need each other... How can we survive contempt?

The antidote is in Jesus' parable. The antidote is humility. Humility restores relationship. Humility makes it possible to *love God with heart, mind, soul and strength*, and *love our neighbor as ourselves*.

Humility is the opposite of being glad "we're not like other people." Humility admits that we are *exactly* like other people. We are all simply human. We are all both breathtakingly beautiful and deeply flawed. We are all beloved and treasured by God.

We are all sinful yet freely forgiven. This is all part of the human condition, and none of us are exempt from the human condition. Holding ourselves above or apart from others is just an illusion. Humility means admitting our humanity. It is the simplest thing imaginable, but can be difficult to live.

Humility is not about putting ourselves down. There's nothing virtuous about beating yourself up. Humility is so much simpler. Recognizing our true standing in the universe and letting it shape who we are. We are no better and no worse than others. We are all on this journey of life together, relying completely and totally on God's grace. We are only human – but we are *God's humans*. And God calls us to honestly, simplicity, openness, so that we can be teachable.

I wonder how much of our arrogance is driven by fear – fear of failing, not measuring up. The Pharisee went far beyond the requirements of the law, praying more, giving more, to justify himself, to stay on God's good side. I wonder how many of us have felt driven to justify ourselves, anxious to win, anxious to always be right. And I wonder what damage it has done to our relationships.

We learn a different wisdom when we practice humility and claim our shared humanity. A friend once directed an overseas service program for young adults, something like the Peace Corps. Every time they trained new volunteers, they made it a point to inform these young people, *"You will experience failure this year, and failure is valuable."* He could tell they didn't believe it. These folks were high achievers, thought they could handle anything. But when they were placed in cross-cultural situations, relating with aboriginal citizens of a foreign country, their western go-getter culture inevitably clashed with indigenous values and a gentler pace of life. Their western arrogance got the best of them, their unexamined racism reared its head, and things went haywire. But when these young people were open to wisdom, they would take a step back and reassess. When they were willing to be humble, they came to the awareness that their way was not the only way. The indigenous culture has its own deep wisdom. Setting aside their pride, they could make genuine connections with beautiful people they might have dismissed before. Humility became a doorway into a shared humanity.

Sometimes life itself teaches us humility as we go through difficult circumstances and realize that nobody is immune from pain and suffering. Maybe we experience a serious illness, or a hard loss, trouble in the family, or financial struggles, unemployment. People often say that a surprising byproduct of terrible pain is compassion. When we are hurting, we may become more open to the pain of others. We realize we are not alone. In fact, we are only human. More than this, we are part of a great family of humanity, depending on one another and depending on God for our very existence.

Being humble before God can help us be humble with others. The Pharisee didn't see this. Maybe the tax collector caught a glimpse – but we don't know what he did when he left that temple. Did he quit his job? Stop cheating his neighbors? We'd love to know if being honest with God made him more honest with people. But parables are often open-ended. It's up to us to supply the ending, or even *live* the ending ourselves.

If we were to draw a spectrum from the scornful, self-justifying Pharisee to the humble, penitent tax collector, where would we stand? Where are we on our journey to humility, honesty, and simplicity? To realizing we are all God's children, all welcome in God's temple, we are all works in progress.

The other morning here at church, our 19th Street sidewalk was covered with garbage from a huge trash bag somebody dumped, and somebody else had torn open and strewn all over. I put on some gloves and started picking things up. A neighbor came by and introduced herself, and together we stood looking at the truly disgusting trash. There were women's clothes, there was spoiled, half-eaten food, Kleenexes, old makeup and personal items, boxes and bags I didn't care to open, and there were foils. Foils are those little squares of scorched aluminum that are left behind when someone has been smoking opioids. So that told us something about the person who left the trash. Both of us were discouraged by what we saw, and by the state of our city and our neighbors.

We talked for quite a while about this incredibly difficult situation, and what struck me was that we were able to stay out of scorn. Our conversation never veered into contempt or judgment. And here's why. As we surveyed the evidence of drug abuse, this neighbor mentioned that she knows how hard it is to overcome addiction, because a family member of hers was caught up in addiction for many years, until his health finally broke. I shared that my family also has experienced the damage of addiction. We stood there together with the realization that there is no "us and them" in this situation. "Them is us," as the old saying goes. We all have a stake in the struggles on our streets, no one is immune or set apart or superior. We all belong to each other, because we are literally related to one another. And it is actually quite beautiful, how God has given us to one another in this way.

There was sadness in that conversation, but there was no contempt or scorn. There also weren't any answers, unfortunately. But we will keep working on it, in the spirit of shared humanity, in the resilience and courage of God's love. Amen.