

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Sunday, October 23, 2016, 11:15 a.m.
The Rev. Kristen Hawley

Phew – well thank God, none of us are like that Pharisee, huh? So self-righteous and smug. Imagine. All – look at me, I fast, I tithe, I go to church every Sunday and probably run a ministry or two, sit on the vestry and volunteer in the community. Turning his nose up at the man on the ground who makes his living by skimming off the top of others' taxes. So... Wait. Why do we want to be more like the Godfather character on his knees than the parishioner giving thanks?

That is what we're supposed to hear in this parable, right? Scorn for the self-righteous Pharisee and a little kumbaya for the humbled tax collector? Derision for the powerful priestly type – the uptight one, and empathy with the contrite enemy of the faithful, the leech of Israel and puppet of Rome?

In our current context of contemptuous politics both at home and abroad, I imagine that it is nearly impossible for any of us to hear this parable and not immediately imagine the two men described by Jesus as anything but rivals – or as my twelve-year-old son would say... as arch enemies. AND... what's more, we assume that we must side with one or the other, identify with the Pharisee or the tax collector and in our identification with one – set ourselves decidedly against the other. If we are honest with ourselves, I would imagine that everyone in this room who really listened to today's gospel, consciously or subconsciously rallied to the side of one of these two men and their situation, or possibly and more probably... many of us gathered first in opposition to one of the men and *then* joined the other's team. It seems that the “phew – so glad that I am not like him, or thank God I am a better person than her” phenomenon, the almost immediate comparison and judgment of two people or groups of people, is one deeply embedded in our humanity.

Were we to look at other similar parables, the Prodigal son and the laborers in the vineyard to name just two – we would see Jesus addressing this same human inclination of either/or, me or him, us versus them. In each parable, Jesus throws light upon the penitent sinner, wayward brother or laborer who put in fewer hours of work for the same amount of pay, as equal to or more deserving of justice and love than the stand-up fellows in each of the three stories. What is more, each of the stand-up and faithful characters that follow the rules and do the work ends up looking the fool in contrast, for whining, grumbling about or looking with contempt upon the former. Our own human need to set ourselves apart and, so often, against one another is a spiritual sickness that Jesus used again and again in his teachings. Our very human need to be first, to be best to be the most faithful, or the most penitent... Jesus uses both, I think, as comedy **and** tragedy in his teachings about who God is and how we are called to be in relationship with him.

When you hear this parable, and others like it – I wonder – what do you hear? Judgment of our own self-righteous and contemptuous behavior? Friendly satire, maybe? Hyperbole? Tragedy? Elizabeth reminds us so often, and rightly so – that, though the parables of Jesus Christ seem to be all about us and how we live our lives... they were actually meant to explain the unexplainable; to give us a glimpse of the character of God.

The beauty, my friends, of our holy scripture... is that it speaks to us all personally, collectively, universally, historically and in this very moment, **if** we are willing to accept it as our story and to find our own place in it. **If** we are willing to give ourselves to the comedy and the tragedy of the

parables, to understand that we are sometimes the Pharisee and sometimes the tax collector, and to accept and embody the incarnate, the crucified and the resurrected Christ and to live our own stories into the narrative of our God. Now - What do I mean by this?

Some of you have heard my soapbox story of how passionate I am about the Action Bible. The Action Bible for those of you who have not yet experienced its power, is this (holding our copy). A faithful and complete translation of our bible as – drum role please... a graphic novel. A bit wary of a friend's advise to get this for our eldest son at Christmas six years ago, I got it anyways – being a bit light on presents that year as I was in my first year of seminary and relying entirely on the magical elves at Amazon to make the Hawley family Christmas happen. William opened it on Christmas morning, took one look and shouted – *Hey, I think someone messed up and I got one of your presents, mom.* Not overly enthused at first. A few days later, he ran across it and... being bored, opened it to take a look. I don't think he put it down for two years. He brought it to school, on long car trips. I began getting awkward calls from mom's whose sons didn't want to keep having to ask to see Will's copy at lunch or on the playground and asked their moms to buy their own copy. All four Hawley children have read the book cover to cover multiple times. In fact, I think that this chewy copy is our second or third edition. Now, if that isn't a miracle in-of-itself... I offer you the "piece de resistance" and reason for my devotion to the Action Bible.

A year or so later, I was walking past our son Alec and issuing forth a litany of chores and jobs that needed to be done. *Have you brushed your teeth? Did you tidy up your room? Has the dishwasher been emptied? Did you make your lunch for tomorrow?* When he suddenly replied... *Whoa, whoa, whoa – what do I look like, your slave? What, am an Israelite? Who are you - Pharaoh?!*

Do you see what happened there? He internalized holy scripture, after eight years of hearing the stories at church and Sunday School, saying prayers and reading the Action Bible again and again – without thinking, the plight of the Israelites in Egypt was his own plight, their learnings, their outrage, their longing for justice – were his. Alec had begun to live his own story into the Christian narrative as he wove the story of his ancestors into his experience.

That, my friends, is a gift and *that* is my hope for us all. That we understand and believe that today's scripture is ours, as much as it belonged to the 1st Century community of Luke. That our lives are meant to be lived, not just through the lens of this parable and the rest of scripture, but lived into the story of God. That today's parable not only speaks to our human nature, but to our lives and speaks to us directly. Our lives on any given day and in any given moment can be comedic, tragic, just or unjust. We may be filled with self-righteousness and contemptuousness thinking, *Phew, thank God I'm a better person* or brought to our knees in humility praying, *God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* We may be the prodigal or the older son, the oppressor or the oppressed. We own every role. No matter who we are – we will, if we live long enough, experience in some way, all of the stories. And... if they belong to us and us to them, they have the power to bring us back – again and again, out of whatever spiritual sickness, wickedness or malady we might have fallen prey to. They have the power to bring us back and into the mercy, love, grace and life of God. Because, phew, Elizabeth is right – our stories are ultimately, always about God. Amen.