



**10/24/10 (Proper 25-C) “A Tale of Two Sinners”**

**Luke 18: 9-14** Rev. Janet B. Weidler

Brett Younger, at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, tells a great story about a time when he used this parable we just heard from Luke as the text for a lunchtime Bible study for college students. Though he suspected that most of them were there for the free lunch, he launched into his subject matter with enthusiasm, giving what he assumed to be fascinating background material about Pharisees, tax collectors, fasting, tithing, and other such. He went on to engage the students in reflections on questions he posed. Q: “What does self-righteousness do to us? Responses: It makes us think other people are inferior. Q: Whom do church people look down on? Responses: The immoral, the poor, the uneducated. Question: Who would be like the tax collectors today? Responses: Mafia bosses, drug dealers, pornographers.

The students really seemed into it, and Brett felt things were going very well, and he even managed to insert several of what he considered to be learned and insightful comments into the discussion. Then he led the students into another round of questions for consideration: he asked the students, what would a Pharisee look like today?

One kid spoke up to say: “A Pharisee would wear khaki pants and a blue sport coat and lead Bible studies.”

Brett writes: I stood there in my khaki pants and blue sport coat and laughed along with everybody else. It was funny. Or maybe it wasn't, because the more I thought about it, the more it took the fun right out of this story. This parable does not say what I would like it to say. The good guys and bad guys are not who I would like them to be. It is hard to really hear this story.” (*Lectionary Homiletics, 10-10*)

It was hard for the first listeners to hear this story as well. In fact, they probably figured that Jesus had gotten the good guys and the bad guys backward. They would naturally assume that the notorious tax collector would be the villain and the good Pharisee would be the hero of the story.

Tax collectors in Jesus day were not like tax collectors today. They were kind of like owners of a franchise business. “They contracted with the Romans to collect taxes from their own people. In return they kept a goodly percentage for themselves. They were rightly considered betrayers in cahoots with the occupying force.” Jesus was not in any way condoning this man's role in helping to maintaining an oppressive social system. But at least this guy, corrupt though he was, was honestly facing his own misdeeds and sin. (*parts of this paragraph and the next excerpted and adapted from “Word & Witness” 10-24-2004*)

At the other end of the spectrum, Pharisees were part of a strong lay renewal movement within Judaism. It's unfortunate that today, the word Pharisee is often used to denote a religious hypocrite or legalist. In many ways, the Pharisees were the reformers of the day, and they were quite genuine in their devotion. While others in the religious establishment were collaborating with the Roman occupiers, and compromising the teachings of



the torah in order to have more power themselves, the Pharisees sought to teach and live a way of life that was as true to the Jewish law as was humanly possible. Jesus was most likely a great admirer of the Pharisees, may have been closely connected with them, even. The problem is not that the guy was a Pharisee, but that his virtue had become a vice.

Today a Pharisee would be the ideal church member who's active on committees, a regular participant in the church's work at the homeless shelter, a generous giver and a dedicated Sunday School teacher. But the virtue becomes a vice, when, while trying to be the best Christians we can be, we start comparing ourselves to others who are not like we are and begin to think, however subtly, that we are superior, and they are inferior. When that happens, we have set up a judgmental barrier between ourselves and the other. If we're going to really understand this story, we need to use it as a mirror we hold up to look at ourselves. Just as the Pharisee in the story thanked God that he was not like the tax collector, we have a tendency to thank God that we are not like that prideful, self-righteous Pharisee. And the world has noticed that we in the church have a tendency toward superiority complexes!

In fact, Christianity is a turn off for many people outside the church, because too many have been on the receiving end of the church's judgmental stances. Three years ago, there was a revealing news story about how young people viewed the Christian faith. The story revealed the results of research done by the Barna Group, a California based research firm. Much of that research was used in the book [unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters](#) by [David Kinnaman](#) and [Gabe Lyons](#) (Hardcover - Oct 1, 2007) (*"Religion News Service 10-8-07; info about article book and & excerpts are quoted or adapted from news story posted on UCC website*)

Let me share some excerpts....

Young people have graded Christianity, and so far, the report card doesn't look good.

Majorities of young people in America describe modern-day Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical and anti-gay. What's more, many Christians don't even want to call themselves "Christian" because of the baggage that accompanies the label. For example, some prefer the term "Christ follower."

The book "unchristian" reveals that church attitudes about people in general and gays in particular are driving a negative image of the Christian faith among people ages 16-29.

The findings in the book were based on surveys of a sample of 867 young people. From that total, researchers reported responses from 440 non-Christians and 305 active churchgoers.

The vast majority of non-Christians -- 91 percent -- said Christianity had an anti-gay image, followed by 87 percent who said it was judgmental and 85 percent who said it was hypocritical.



Such views were held by smaller percentages of the active churchgoers, but the faith still did not fare well: 80 percent agreed with the anti-gay label, 52 percent said Christianity is judgmental, and 47 percent declared it hypocritical.

Kinnaman said one of the biggest surprises for researchers was the extent to which respondents -- one in four non-Christians -- said that modern-day Christianity was no longer like Jesus.

It seems to me that one recent issue that is becoming more and more of a hot topic lately there are certain “barometers” of how much the church today is truly like Jesus- one of those is the immigration issue is another kind of “barometer” of how much like Jesus we as Christians really are. There is a new campaign now, that I read about on Facebook, to drop the I-word- and stop referring to people as illegals. The word illegal, like the word illegitimate, demeans the humanity and value of some people who are just as much the children of God as any other. There is a link on Facebook to an article by Carlos Roa, who has lived in this country since childhood, but through no fault of his own has no legal papers. His grandfather was a U.S. citizen, but his father did not complete the steps necessary for him and his family to attain legal status. Carlos comments on the traumatic effects the label illegal alien has had on his life and the feelings of inferiority it creates:

“I am not a law-breaker, but throughout my life, it has felt like the law is trying to break me... In my senior year, I was deeply depressed. I understood that my status was going to prevent me from attending college or any university, joining the military, getting a good job and even obtaining a driver's license. I felt a lot of resentment toward my father for not adjusting our status. At that time, I didn't realize that the system makes it nearly impossible for people like me to become "legalized."

“When we migrate to this country, we come to improve our lives, no different than the immigrants of the past centuries, many of whom were also subjected to racism and discrimination, yet whose descendants are revered today for improving our society. What does it say about the current state of our society, when the Supreme Court rules that corporations are considered legal persons and yet human beings are deemed "illegal"? That kind of contradiction reinforces the criminalization of people like me.” (*What Part of Human Being Don't You Understand*, by Carlos A. Roa; [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carlos-roa/what-part-of-human-being-\\_b\\_768461.html?ir=College](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carlos-roa/what-part-of-human-being-_b_768461.html?ir=College))

On the website Colorlines.com, there is a powerful video which goes into more detail about the destructive impact of the i-word. In 2010, the use of the word illegal quadrupled over its use in 2009. The word plays on peoples’ economic anxieties and feeds racial biases; extremists have used the word to divide and deceive people and to scapegoat the most vulnerable. In recent times, Hate crimes against Latinos have risen by 40%.; one tragic example of which is a young man on Long Island who was brutally assaulted and stabbed to death when a group of high school students went out looking for Mexicans to beat up. Hateful language toward those labeled as illegal has become more and more predominant - “you f- ing Mexicans, you illegals have come to this country to take our money.” The word illegal in connection with immigrants has in effect become a racial epitaph; a way of legitimizing violence against a group of people because of who they are. In short, the i-word feeds the hate machine.



How easily a virtue - such as citizenship- becomes a vice when the pursuit of that virtue makes us judgmental toward those who appear to have less of that virtue, and indifferent or insensitive to their humanity. “I thank you God that I am not like that illegal alien who takes away jobs and undermines our values. I thank God I am a legal U.S. citizen, I pay my taxes, I go to church every Sunday.” You get the picture. The website, [colorlines.com](http://colorlines.com) gives a great deal more supporting information about this issue and urges people to sign a pledge not to use the i-word, and to call on the media not to use the i-word.

I wonder how many good Christian church goers will step up and support this effort. And I wonder how many of those who support this will fall into the trap of thanking God we are not like those other rednecks or hypocrites who don't think the way we do. Today's parable has a powerful message for people all over the political and social and religious spectrum. I am reminded of that wonderful quotation: “in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity- and I would add to that humility. In all things charity and humility.

There was a “Still Speaking” Daily Devotional this past week, which to me really captured the essence of today's parable and it's teaching. It was written by Lillian Daniel, an author and a UCC pastor in Illinois, and it is entitled “Things I am Tired of.” Let me share this with you in conclusion to this sermon.

*“Things I Am Tired Of,” by Lillian Daniel (adapted slightly)*

*“I am tired of hearing people say stupid things in the name of Christianity. I am tired of nutty pistol-packing pastors who want to burn the Koran. I am tired of televangelists who claim that natural disasters are the will of God. I am tired of Christians who respond to the pain of disease with a lecture about behavior. I am tired of preachers who promise prosperity...*

*I am also tired of...people who have one bad experience with a church and paint the whole of Christianity with that brush. I am tired of celebrities who criticize the church for being patriarchal and homophobic but do nothing to support the churches that are not.*

*I am tired of people who say they want a church like ours but cannot be bothered to attend one. And I am tired of people who criticize churches like ours and go somewhere else.*

*I feel like I live in a society where the stupid and simple in spirituality always trump the depths of a complex faith. We are a people .... who depart from sound (faith) in favor of easy answers.*

*Perhaps I am really just tired of myself. In criticizing others in their faith, I hardly live up to the best in my own faith. Perhaps the people who irritate me the most are exposing my own false (truths)*

The meditation ends with a prayer, which I offer now as a closing prayer:

### **Prayer**

*God, guide me toward true (understanding) not of my own making but of yours. Keep my focus on the one who died on the cross, and not on the little mini-god I have created in my own image. Amen.*