

In 1920, Robert Benchley wrote: "There may be said to be two classes of people in the world; those who constantly divide the people of the world into two classes, and those who do not. Both classes are extremely unpleasant to meet socially, leaving practically no one in the world whom one cares very much to know." It's a joke, but Benchley is onto something here. Humans love dividing the world in two—good guys and bad guys, have and have nots, the light side of the force and the dark, right and left, capitalist and socialists, Buckeye fans and the wicked. Religious people may be the best at this game of all—righteous and unrighteous, Protestant and Catholic, Christian and non-Christian. We all know what it means to divide the world in two. When we do that, which side do you place yourself on? The good side, obviously. It's those other people who are the problem. We call this dualistic thinking. This parable of Jesus seems to undo one dualism only to replace it with another, causing us to wonder, is there a way out of dualistic thinking or are we condemned to divide the world in two, leaving practically no one in the world whom one cares very much to know? Is there a better way?

If there is a better way, we need to examine our assumptions as we come to this short, subversive parable. Luke says Jesus told this parable, "to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust." So, who do you think Jesus has in mind here? Surely, not I, Lord. I would never do that. As a good Presbyterian, I know to always look to God for my righteousness and not to myself. I wouldn't regard others with disgust. Obviously, this parable is meant for someone else. Phew! That's a relief. Now that we have that out of the way, we can figure out exactly who these self-righteous, contemptuous people are. They are the worst, aren't they? I'm so glad I'm not like them.

The parable begins, "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." Here we are, once again, dealing with a Pharisee, which for Christians is a stereotype. **[Slide: Who Were the Pharisees?]** The word "Pharisee," for many of us is synonymous with hypocrite. But that's our assumption. Before we even hear the story, we think we know what a Pharisee is, and that's a problem. It's a problem in this story, and it's a problem in our everyday life. When we think we know someone before we meet them, talk to them, or get to know them, our divisions will only be further entrenched. But for God to speak a new word, a third way beyond our dualisms, we must give up our assumptions about those whom we have not yet met.

The truth is for Jesus' audience, **the Pharisees were the good guys**. They took the scriptures seriously. They cared for the people. They were not sold-out to the Roman occupiers, like the Sadducees, but instead were a movement of the people, seeking to bring a little bit of the Kingdom of God to earth right here and now. They were not hypocrites. They were people, good, moral people trying their best in a tough, tough world. Jesus says, "The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like

this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive." What do we make of this prayer? If we assume he is a self-righteous hypocrite, then we will conclude this prayer is awful, and so is he. But if we give him the benefit of the doubt, we might find this prayer to be from someone who goes above and beyond what God's law requires, out of love for God and neighbor. Is it a bit humorous and over the top? Yes, it is. I think it's meant to be. But let me ask you, are you glad you're not a murderer? I am. Does that make me a self-righteous prig? I don't think so. It's OK to have gratitude for the paths you've avoided along the way. Maybe this Pharisee is a bit over the top in his prayer, but I think Jesus sets him up as the super-saint, the one who does it all right, even beyond what's expected. And that's not the worst thing, is it?

Enter the tax-collector. Just like we assume Pharisees are bad guys, there is a tendency to view tax-collectors as good guys, as misunderstood outcasts. But that's not what a first century tax collector was. Tax collectors were those who exploited their own people by conspiring with an occupying power and got rich in the process. These were not good people. **They were bad guys.** Imagine a child of this church who went into the pharmaceutical industry and knowingly misled people about the safety of opioids and become rich in the process. How would you feel about that person coming here to pray on Sunday morning? Jesus said, "the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.'" He's sorry. That's all we know about this guy. He's sorry, which is good as far as it goes. But we don't know that he's going to make amends or change his ways. For all we know, he'll go back to doing the same thing Monday morning, and I don't know about you, but that makes me mad.

Jesus makes it worse by saying, "I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." What are we to make of this story? Is it a simple reversal of expectations? The good guy is really a bad guy, and the bad guy is a good guy. Is that it? I don't think so. Because this simply replaces one dualism with another. We still end up in a worldview where humanity is divided in two, and it's our job to end up on the good side, the humble side.

Well, Greek is a tricky language. Prepositions in Greek can mean many different things, which can be confusing. When Jesus says, "this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee," that word "rather" is *para* in Greek and can just as easily be translated "alongside." **Hear how different that would sound,** "this person went down to his home justified alongside the Pharisee." Here's a radical thought, what if both are justified by God, the good and the bad, the saint and the sinner alike? That would undo all our dualisms once and for all. That would be a true Reformation.

Next week is Reformation Sunday, where we celebrate that for 500 years, Christians have rejoiced that God's grace is for everyone, without distinction. God's grace comes as a gift to both saints and sinners alike. It isn't a reward for good behavior,

nor is it revoked for bad behavior. Though it's been 500 years since this message has been proclaimed, and I'm still not sure we've truly heard the good news. Because if we did, if we dared to believe that God could be this indiscriminately loving, then all our measurements of our goodness and badness get cast aside. All our divisions of us and them would be gone, and all that would be left is us.

Martin Luther had a famous Latin phrase that he coined during the Reformation. He said that we are **Simul justus et Peccator, simultaneously justified and sinner**. To be justified by God is to be declared good enough, made right, in the family. The good news is that's how God views you—holy, righteous, and good. At the same time, you still mess things up, don't you? I sure do. Despite all my strivings, my prayers and my generosity, despite all my attempts to love everyone, I still look at certain people with contempt. Despite all my strivings, I'm still a sinner, and I don't have to pretend like I'm not. Both live in me—the Pharisee and the tax collector, the saint and the sinner. The goal is not to become one and condemn the other, for to condemn one is to condemn ourselves because we are both at the same time, simultaneously saint and sinner. God loves all sinners and saints and justifies them alongside each other, all welcomed at one big table, which is good news because that's who we are, all of us. All of us. All of us.