

Differences and Divisions

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The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
The Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday
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Sirach 35:12-17; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

“Two men went up to the temple to pray. . . .” -- Luke 18:10

Today is Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday, when we commemorate the work of those folks we commonly call the Protestant Reformers – people like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, and Philip Melancthon.

This is a peculiarly Protestant occasion; neither our Orthodox nor Roman Catholic siblings find anything in the Reformation to commemorate, and fewer and fewer of us Protestant Christians reserve the Sunday closest to October 31st to remember what this family feud is all about.

And that’s exactly what the Reformation is. It’s a family squabble that, on occasion, turned bloody, which is one of the reasons we dress the sanctuary and its ministers in red. Blood was shed in western Europe a few hundred years ago in the Christian church’s attempt to make itself better.

And we believe that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired Martin Luther to nail his ninety-five grievances against his church to the door of one of those churches in Wittenberg, Germany, on All Saints’ Eve. That’s the other reason the liturgical color for the day is red: to signify the inspiring presence of the Holy Spirit.

And as much as we mainline religious folks would like to believe that the Holy Spirit is a unifying force – one of our most popular hymns is “Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether” -- the lessons from history suggest otherwise. Sometimes – often, perhaps – when the Holy Spirit touches someone’s life, that person sees things differently than they saw things before. And when you see things differently, you tend to behave differently, and it’s easy to see your new way as right and your old way – and everyone who still lives it – as wrong. And that’s when we move from difference to division. Commemorating the ongoing Reformation is very much about that perennially fateful step.

So the question forces itself upon us: Can we honor our differences without letting them divide us?

And the answer, of course, really depends neither on our differences nor our divisions, but rather on us and what we choose to make of those traits that make us distinctive. There are good ways and not so good ways of seeing one’s strengths and one’s weaknesses, and in the nature of that self-awareness, I think, lies the key to respecting differences while working to overcome our divisions. Scripture, as usual, has something important to teach us about this.

Let’s take those two fellows who went up to the temple to pray in that little story from Luke. One, Jesus tells us, was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. Both were Jewish, because a non-Jew would not go up to the Jerusalem temple to pray or for any other purpose. So that’s the first thing this teeny-tiny parable tells us: two people, in the

same religious family, can have very different opinions of themselves and their religion and what their religion means to them and can do for them.

Now, when we modern Christians hear the word Pharisee, we've been conditioned by centuries of reading the New Testament to react negatively. The Pharisees come in for a serious drubbing in the gospels – not so much in the rest of the New Testament, interestingly enough – and we tend to take a simplistic and stereotypical view of this group of religious people largely based on ignorance. So let's try to be a little bit fairer to a prominent group of Jesus's opponents this morning and see why Jesus juxtaposed a Pharisee and a tax collector in his story about spiritual self-righteousness.

The word Pharisee comes from a Hebrew word that means "separate," and that's how the Pharisees understood themselves: separate from other Jews and separate from other people. Why? Because they understood themselves to be a reform movement within Judaism. They were the purifiers, or so they thought. Their roots appear to lie in a resurgence of Jewish nationalism about 160 years before Jesus, and they actively tried to create a Jewish religious state under Greek and Roman overlords. That's hard to do if you don't want to get on the wrong side of your occupiers, so the Pharisees developed an elaborate system of interpreting the law of Moses so that ordinary Jewish people could observe it under a variety of changing historical and social circumstances AND not get on the wrong side of Greek or Roman law. That required considerable flexibility, which other Jews, like the Saducees, the Essenes, and the followers of Jesus, saw as selling out.

And that's certainly one of the reasons the Pharisees get such a black eye in the New Testament: later Jewish reformers, like Jesus, saw the Pharisees as representing a corrupt, accommodationist religious establishment that had led Judaism into error and decay.

Sound familiar? It should, because every reform movement since has seen its parent religion in exactly the same way. Martin Luther, for example, didn't think of himself as a Protestant; that term wasn't used to describe the reformers in the Catholic Church until at least a dozen years after Luther posted his ninety-five propositions on Wittenberg Castle, and it didn't apply, at first, to the original reformers. It was, rather, a term used by both supporters and opponents of the Christian reform movement in western Europe in the sixteenth century, and the opponents intended it as an insult. To them, the "Protestants" were the people who just would not be satisfied with anything except getting their own way. Some folks regard today's Tea Partiers as embodying that attitude, and as we all know, Tea Party is a term of pride for some and a term of derision for others. That's how Protestants were originally perceived.

Now we, of course, think of ourselves as right, just as that Pharisee in Jesus's story that of himself as right. He, too, had once been a reformer, trying to rescue his religion from corruption and error. And just like that Pharisee, we, too, run the risk of becoming self-righteous.

I was talking to the owner of a local body shop recently who saw the UCC decal in my back window and began asking me about our denomination. Things were going along tickety-boo until I used the word "liberal," at which point my questioner's attitude went from curious to suspicious, and in a flash I was no longer explaining but defending. I'm sure many of you have had the same experience, especially with folks who think that we should believe and teach the truth of the Bible.

I'm all for believing and teaching the truth of the Bible, so let's take a look at the other fellow who went up to the temple to pray.

Jesus says that he was a tax collector. Now, you can't think IRS here, because that's not who tax collectors were in first-century Palestine. Collaborator would be an accurate description; a Quisling or even a Benedict Arnold might not be too strong a term

to describe the behavior of the tax collectors in the gospels. Older English translations refer to them as publicans, which is simply their Latin name – *publicani* – yanked over into English. The tax collectors in the gospels were local Jews who worked for Rome; they were imperial public servants responsible not only for collecting taxes, but also for supplying the Roman army, managing port duties, and overseeing public building projects. They were usually crooked, and they were generally hated by their neighbors. One of Jesus’s apostles, Matthew (or Levi), was a tax collector, so you can imagine how popular that choice was with the locals. Tax collectors are often linked with sinners and prostitutes in the gospels, but Jesus told the respectable religious people like us that the tax collectors and prostitutes were ahead of them in the race toward God’s realm. That’s in Matthew’s gospel (21:31), and Matthew also tells us that one of the criticisms leveled against Jesus was that he ate with tax collectors and sinners (11:19). That doesn’t seem like such a big deal to us, but try to imagine inviting your local wife-beater over for dinner and you’ll get a better grasp of what Jesus’s contemporaries thought of the company he kept.

Perhaps Jesus did so because he saw that tax collectors – unlike the Pharisee who was pleased that he was not like other people – the tax collectors knew they were sinners and that they were just like other people. It was no doubt true that the Pharisee was not a thief or a rogue or an adulterer or even a tax collector, and it was no doubt true that the Pharisee was as pious as he claimed: fasting twice a week – once was considered satisfactory – and tithing ten percent of his income. That was undoubtedly all true. The Pharisee wasn’t a liar; he just told a convenient truth. He told the truth about himself to himself in such a way as to make himself feel superior to other people. He used what was true to separate himself from others, which, Jesus makes clear in this parable, is a misuse of the truth. Jesus is telling us – warning us – that you can tell the truth and be wrong at the same time. Or as one of my deans once said of St. Jerome, who was apparently quite full of himself, you can defend the right in such a way that people prefer to be wrong.

Tax collectors, or at least the one in this little story, knew that they were far from perfect; heck, they knew they were far from righteous. And it was precisely this kind of honest self-knowledge – acknowledging the parts of our lives for which we have to take both credit and blame – that leads us to an awareness that God’s mercy isn’t for other people; it’s for us: “God be merciful to me, a sinner!”

I love the church, and I love the branch of the church that calls itself Protestant; all of you know that. But one of the great dangers of the church is that it can persuade people to substitute observance of its teachings and its rituals for the utter dependence on God’s mercy, grace, and love that actually make us who God intends for us to be. The church can’t do that and it has never been able to do that. At its very best, the church can expose us, week after week, to that message – to that promise and hope we call the gospel – and provide us with examples of others who have sought that promise and hope for themselves and are trying to live into that promise and hope in their daily lives. That is the best that the church has ever done or can ever do. The rest is up to God.

Tax collectors were outcasts and they knew it, so God’s mercy, rather than social acceptance, became their anchor. It’s interesting to me that Jesus doesn’t say that the repentant tax collector left the temple and found another line of work. Jesus doesn’t say that he stopped collecting taxes. That would have been the respectable thing to do, but Jesus always seems much more interested in repentance than in respectability. It’s hard for us to grasp that because we’re much closer to the Pharisee than we are to the tax collector. We’re the insiders, the socially and religiously respectable people, confident of our grasp on what it means to be good, and it is our very respectability that may come

between us and a life-changing encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. We may be too respectable for Jesus because we're more concerned with being good than with being generous in the way that Jesus was generous. You'll recall that Jesus didn't have much by way of possessions, so he wasn't generous TO people as much as he was generous WITH people. He was generous with their faults, their weaknesses, and their histories. He didn't hold their trespasses against them, as we do through our penal system. We punish people again and again and again. We're much better at punishing than forgiving, and those of us who don't like that notion say that we're just holding people accountable for their actions. That's pretty much what that mob said to Jesus as they were about to stone the woman caught committing adultery – they were just holding her accountable for her actions. Nothing is said in that story about holding the man accountable for his actions. Funny how that works. And the mob was made up of the good people, the people who knew right from wrong.

Friends, on this Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday, when we remind ourselves of one of the many struggles of the Christian church to make itself better, I hope we'll also remember the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, who represent such different ways of being religious. And even though I believe our reforming ancestors were right to criticize a Medieval Christian church mired in superstition and corruption, I pray that God will grant me the mercy be a Protestant without being self-righteous. I pray that for myself and, for those of you who wish it, I pray it for all of you.