

Luke 18:9-14

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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In our gospel story today we have a parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In other words- the bad guy and the worse guy. We know, because we come to church regularly and read our Bible, that the Pharisees were the leaders, the priests of the Temple in Jesus’ day. We also know that Jesus and the Pharisees were often at odds with each other. The Pharisees were all about the letter of the law and Jesus was all about the heart of the law. So obviously the Pharisee is not the protagonist, remember that word from English 101- it means the main character who we like- “pro”. In the Gospels the Pharisees are more often the Antagonists, the anti good guy, the bad guy.

But this Pharisee isn’t so bad, listen to all his good qualities, we know them because he lists them out for us. The Pharisee prays, fasts, attends worship, works for the Temple, lives a righteous life, does good deeds, and is an upstanding member of the community. He is a good guy, or at least he is trying to be, as best he knows how.

But, for the purposes of this story he is the “bad guy”. One thing is for certain, he is not a *humble* guy. And we can see that because of the prayer he utters. Not only does he list his own accomplishments of which he is ever so proud, but he goes on and compares himself to others. Others whom he is certain are beneath him, “Thank God I am not like others... especially not like that lousy, tax collecting, traitor over there.”

Now, we would never say a prayer like that! Nope not us. Because, Thank God we are not a hypocrite like that, not like those holy rollers, those holier than thou ...wait....wait a minute- what just happened?

Any number of times we set ourselves apart from those other ones, those ones less fortunate, those from another religion, or another country or another baseball teams fans...When we do that, we are engaging in a process of “Othering”. So What is “Othering” you may ask.

OTHERING 101: WHAT IS “OTHERING”?

By “othering”, we mean any action by which an individual or group becomes mentally classified in somebody’s mind as “not one of us”.

This psychological tactic may have had its uses in our tribal past. Group cohesion was crucially important in the early days of human civilization, and required strong demarcation between our allies and our enemies. To thrive, we needed to be part of a close-knit tribe who'd look out for us.

As a result, there's a powerful evolutionary drive to identify in some way with a tribe of people who are "like you", and to feel a stronger connection and allegiance to them than to anyone else. Today, this tribe might be, for instance, an extended family, a neighborhood, a church, fellow supporters of a sports team or political party.

Political partisanship is a common area for "othering" to be found. We often speak of "Democrats" or "Republicans" with derision, imagining this "other" to be a homogeneous group. (This information is adapted from a statement on the web site therearenoothers.com)

So let's turn to the *other* character in the story, the Tax Collector. OK No one likes tax collectors! That is a given. It was true in Jesus' day and is still true today. Tax collectors were low down dirty, thieving, scoundrels. They collected the taxes for Rome, but they charged huge percentages above and beyond the taxes to do it. You had to pay through them, there was no the option. So this guy can't be the protagonist, can he? Well, of course, we know, because we are after all good Bible reading church attending folk, we know, that this being one of Jesus' parables, the least likely or even likable one is the protagonist after all.

Now listen closely to what the tax collector is doing. He first of all does not even dare to enter the temple compound. He remains on the outskirts, the edges of the enclosure. He knows he is a conspirator with the oppressors, the Romans. He knows he is not welcome even by his own people, even here at the temple, especially here at the temple. And so he stands apart, as he lives his life, apart, apart from his community. Alone. An island. And he prays- have mercy on me. The Tax Collector knows he is unworthy. And so he throws himself on God's mercy. Unlike the pious Priest, he knows he has done nothing to earn God's grace, nothing to merit God's love, nothing even to be offered pardon and forgiveness for the sin he confesses. And yet, and yet he has come to the temple anyways.

It is no accident that this whole scene unfolds at the temple. On the grounds of the temple you were always acutely aware of where you stood, of whether you were in or out. There was the outermost courtyard of the gentiles, where anyone could come, there was the inner courtyard for the Jews only, and that divided between women and men, and then of course there was the inner most court, for the Priests, and lastly the Holy of Holies, where God alone resided and only one Priest at a time could enter. To be at the temple was to know your status, and for everyone's to know your status. Were you "in" or were you "out".

Are you religious or secular, are you righteous or self-righteous, are you a saint or a sinner, As soon as we start to divide people into groups, we have aligned ourselves with the Pharisee. As

soon as we make a demarcation of Other-ness, we are doomed. Because every time we draw a line and place some on one side and some on the other- we will always find God on the side of the other!

And that is the trick of this parable- there is no good guy or bad guy. Only people. People who are beloved children of God. just like you and me, and that guy over there, and the one down the street in the coffee shop, just people God loves. God alone can judge the heart and God chooses to judge through the act of unimaginable, unfathomable love. AMEN!