

## Naked and Dead

With many of our gospel lessons, we've heard them so often that it's tempting to think that we know what's going on.

Like the gospel we just heard.

We know Pharisee means a "religious hypocrite."

While tax collectors are just old time underdogs.

Which leads us to give today's Pharisee the hairy eyeball, while we root for the tax man.

But that's probably NOT how Jesus intends this story; nor how his original listeners heard it.

That's because the Christian spin room can be even more creative than Fox News, or MSNBC.

For centuries, we've put down the Pharisees as a way of putting down the Jewish people, as even today anti-Semitism rears its ugly head.

But the Pharisees are simply a group of liberal lay people, trying to help regular folks follow God's law.

While tax collectors, far from being misunderstood lovable lunks, are understandably despised by everyone, because they steal from their own people.

Our tax collector is right to hang his head in shame.

He's got plenty to be ashamed about!

And when the Pharisee says "thank God for the life I have," his contemporaries hear gratitude – and humility.

So if the point of today's parable is not: "tax collector good, Pharisee bad," what is the point?

If we're to hear what Jesus' audience heard, we might say:

"A priest and a pimp went to the church to pray...."

Right away, we get the idea the priest is probably a good guy.

And the pimp?

Well, he's a pimp!

Leaving us to scratch our head as the pimp, like the tax collector, goes home justified, while the priest, like the Pharisee, doesn't.

So what's Jesus driving at?

The Pharisee is faithful to his wife.

He gives 10% of everything to God as a tithe.

He fasts all the time.

He's honest, trustworthy and grateful to God for all his blessings.

What church doesn't want this paragon as its member?

Compared to Tommy the tax collector?

You want rotten?!

Look up "rotten" in the dictionary!

His picture's there!

Because he's a combination strong arm man, loan shark and corrupt IRS agent.

He's not good at all.

Yet the "bad man" goes home justified.

While the "good man" doesn't.

What's up Jesus?

You punch the president of the Rotary Club in the eye and then kiss the loan shark's cheek?

That's unfair!

But maybe what Jesus is trying to do is to take us back to where the Problem started.

The capital "P" problem, which began way back, in the garden.

Where our parents, Adam and Eve had everything.

Everything, except for one forbidden thing.

"You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

If you eat from that tree, you're dead." Gn 2:16-17.

Of course they eat.

Consuming the knowledge of good and evil.

Deciding that rather than leaving judgments about who is good and what is evil to God, they themselves shall decide, as we now decide, what is good — and who is evil.

And that tragic decision is our downfall.

We call it "original sin" because it infects us all.

It's the root cause of gossip over the backyard fence (because looking down on others is the whole point of gossip).

It's the cause of all destructive pride (because my superiority depends on your inferiority).

It's the cause of all nationalism and war (because my definition of "good" must defeat my definition of "evil").

And it's why our Pharisee today is thanking God for not making him like this pile of human debris — the tax collector.

Today, Jesus takes us back to the beginning.

He reverses Adam's blunder.

By giving back to God alone the power to say who is good — and what is evil.

Then, teaching us to do the same.

How do we give that power back to God?

By obeying Jesus when he says:

“Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged.”

“With the measure you measure, it will be measured back to you.”

Or as we might say today:

“Be kind to everyone you meet, because everyone you meet is having a tough time.”

A fellow once said: “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as **we are.**”

In other words, we encounter everyone and everything through the distorted lens of our own experiences.

Our own biases.

Our own fears.

And because of that, we fail miserably when it comes to deciphering the difference between good and evil.

Today, Jesus invites us to look at ourselves, and all of creation, through God’s eyes.

The only eyes qualified to truly see who is good and what is evil.

Which is a terrifying invitation.

Terrifying because of the countless hours spent dressing up in front of the mirror of other people's expectations.

Dressing up to avoid the nightmare of showing myself to be who and what I really am.

That I'm naked — and vulnerable.

Today's parable shocks our refined sensibilities because it insists that our true condition, is abject nakedness.

Not the tuxedos and gowns we wear to impress, and then dominate, each other.

Isn't that why the tax collector is justified, while the Pharisee isn't?

The tax man knows he's naked.

The Pharisee doesn't.

When God refuses to justify the self-justifying Pharisee and instead justifies the contemptible tax collector, God says to that Pharisee, and us, "you'll never be free until you're naked in the face of this whole business of justifying yourself." Capon, Parables, 343, paraphrased.

For weeks now we have reflected on the character of God's mercy.

Mercy poured out so lavishly and recklessly on unjust stewards and corrupt judges, on lost sheep, lost coins, lost children.

Today, it all comes home to you and I.

And the question is: "How can I receive God's mercy?"

And perhaps the answer might be this:

"Blessed are you merciful, you shall receive mercy."

"Blessed are you lost, God has found you."

"Blessed are you who delight in the unfair generosity of God, you will share in it too."

Jesus is the new Adam precisely because he makes us into a new creation.

Jesus pries away our grip on the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, and gives it back to God, who alone truly knows the difference.

Then, Jesus places the terrifying, yet liberating truth of our condition into our now empty hand.

As he moves us from recognizing our nakedness to the next, necessary step.

Recognizing that we are not only naked, we are also dead.

Oh sure, we're running around just fine today.

But as old Aunt Harriet used to say, "Life is just a walk around the block."

There's not a thing we can do to beat death.

Not good works.

Not good looks.

Not good manners.

Only the God who raises the dead can beat death.

And resurrection can't be bargained for or earned or deserved.

It's a gift.

Because the tax collector's hands are empty, God can fill them.

By admitting he's dead, he's open to the grace of God.

But the Pharisee prays with hands that are full.

Of his own efforts.

His own judgments.

His own sense of entitlement.

There's no room for mercy.

For grace.

"Only when, like the tax collector, you can admit that you're dead -  
- only then can you stop running from grace.

Granted, acknowledging that you're dead — is scary.



You might cry and kick and scream because it means putting yourself out of the only game you know.

The game of justifying yourself.

The game of judging others.

But know this.

Accepting that you're dead?

It only takes one single step.

Not out of reality into nothingness.

But one step — from fiction — into fact.

And when you do finally take it, you'll laugh out loud at how short the trip actually is!

Because, it isn't a trip after all.

You're already there." Id.

But now, you have the eyes to see it.

amen+

