The Best and the Worst in Us
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Year C, Ordinary 30
Joel 2:23-32; Luke 18:9-14
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Luke in today's gospel is trying to make a particular point. Sometimes in Jesus' illustrative examples you can find wriggle room for ambiguity, or see the possibility of there being more than one way to see things. But today's message seems pretty straight forward. It's directed at those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Especially with the potshot the Pharisee has at the tax collector. The message is clear, the tax collector, not the Pharisee went home justified, aligned with God.

Of the two characters, which one do you side with? Who do you think it would be better to be like? The most obvious answer is the tax collector, the humble one, the one made right with God. **And yet** as soon as we take a side, deem one more worthy than the other we become much like the Pharisee, the very person we object to. It's as if the story, in its telling, undoes itself. We feel invited to judge, to deem one more righteous than the other. Immediately that makes us someone who trusts they know what's righteous and thereby potentially has contempt for one who falls short.

Amy-Jill Levine, liberal Jewish rabbi, provides some useful context. She points out, **both** of these men have come into the Temple to pray. **Both** made themselves ritually clean, for **both** know what's required to belong in this place. The Pharisee's prayer reveals that he fulfils

what the Law requires, in fact he surpasses what the Law requires. He opens his prayer by thanking God for his moral excellence – even as the rest of the prayer does seem to be all about him. Levine reflects, rather than seeing the Pharisee as all selfish and bad we might see him as **helping** the tax collector. For just as the sin of one person impacts the community (hence, "forgive us our sins" rather than "forgive me my sins"), so the merits of the righteous can benefit the community. Perhaps the Jews who first heard this parable understood the Pharisee's merit **positively** impacted the tax collector. This would be the parable's shock: not only that the agent of Rome is justified but that the Pharisee's own good works **helps** in that justification. In this story, the characters are set in opposition to one other, yet both belong in the Temple, both are part of this faith community. Bound together their lives are intertwined, each impacts the other.

We might now see the Pharisee in a different light. But it doesn't diminish the fact that the better part of his feeling good about himself comes from favourably comparing himself with just about **everyone.** He's pretty judgy, particularly of the hapless tax collector who happens to be in view. Unlike the tax collector, who's prayer also beginning "O God" is simple and short, "Be merciful to me, a sinner." As if he knows who he is in himself. He knows he's not righteous and in need of mercy. He accepts his characterization by the Pharisee**.** He accepts the gift of the Pharisee's good works.

Some shift of perspective seems to be happening. It is the heart of each man that Jesus discerns, the honest **intention** of each of them. The Pharisee is indeed faithful for keeping the law and doing good works have merit. Yet if the doing of them becomes the reward, close-heartedness can be the outcome. Through his open hearted honesty that being an agent of Rome gains him no merit, the tax

collector opens himself to the transforming grace of God, to righteousness.

Both these men belong in the faith community before God. This isn't in question. Luke's characterisation of them might give us information about a faith community. We, as a faith community, might learn something from this about our community and of ourselves as individuals within it of who we are, or think we are before God. The two characters seem to reflect the best and the worst in all of us that inevitably we bring.

That best self: the one that's honest before God, pure hearted. Aware of all we receive, aware there's nothing we've done or **can** do to deserve it. The self, aware we act in ways to dishonour this and in so doing dishonour ourselves and the One who gifts us. For this we're heartfelt sorry, we know our need for mercy, the grace of forgiveness. We're justified, made right with God when, like the tax collector, we're willing, able to receive forgiveness, reorient and align with God.

Then there's that other self, the worst one who works hard and well and ardently to make sure we're right, holy, worthy before God. That can lead us to appoint ourselves arbiter of what is holy and right and worthy. To judge and determine of the worth of another. For the truth is we do tend to judge a lot of people in the world (even though we may not say it our loud). We don't have to look too far – let's stay in the community, or our workplace, or our family, or, heck, some of us can stay right in our pew! We can talk and pray about it 'til we're blue in the face, but there's something about them that rubs us up the wrong way. It happens even before we know it. And it's hard to give it up because in a weird way it's part of making us who we are – **NOT** them. Justifying our position over against them, **locates** us. The ardency, passion and surety that comes with this worst self gets a lot done, good stuff. Without a passion and zeal for continuity we mightn't be here today. Being religious in continuity with tradition

isn't all bad, we might just need to be careful it doesn't blind us to the heart of things.

When we judge others, we inevitably police and judge ourselves as much, if not more harshly. If we're not mindful we can come to think we need, in fact **have to** earn God's favour and that we **can**. We become those who determine what God's favour is, what it looks like, its parameters and who can have it. We think **our effort** will make us holy, right with God, and God can get written out of the story. Such process diminishes us and shrinks our world, makes narrow our lives and our focus. If we're not careful we may find **we've** become the end purpose for and of God belonging, the point of it all because that's what mostly fills our world. We may be OK with this. But if we're not, if we consider our call to be a conduit rather than a filter of God into the world there's always hope. All that's asked, if the tax collector's any example, is the intention of our heart to be honest about how we are, willing to receive forgiveness, the awareness we can be otherwise and open to receive the wholeness we are in God. A willingness to act with God rather than as God.