

October 27, 2019

Dan Hollis

I went on a trip recently by plane, and it made me think of a story I heard a while back about a man who had a long layover at the airport one night. He went to one of those convenience stores they have in the terminal and bought a book and a bag of cookies to pass the time. He sat down at his gate and got lost in his new book. A few chapters in, he noticed out of the corner of his eye the woman sitting next to him reach into the bag sitting between them and snag a cookie, which she shamelessly started *eating*. Now, the man was tired, and he didn't want to cause a scene with a woman he didn't know in a crowded terminal, so he just sat there, pretending to read, when again, the woman reached over and took another cookie.

He was *fuming*. "Who does this woman think she is? I *paid* for those cookies, and she didn't even *ask* if she could *have* one. I bet I would've even *given* her one if she'd *asked*!"

When she took the *third* cookie, the game was on. He decided, without giving away that he was on to her, that he would start taking one cookie for every cookie *she* took. Still he stared down at the book in his lap, and still she *kept* stealing his cookies, until one by one they worked their way to the bottom of the bag.

There was one cookie left.

*Finally* the woman looked at him. They locked eyes, she laughed nervously, took the last cookie, and broke it in half. She gave him half of the last cookie. *His* cookie. And then she turned away and munched her half in silence.

The *nerve* of her! She didn't even say thank you!

Before the man could even decide how to tell this thief off, the plane began boarding and he gladly put his book in his backpack and marched to the plane, not looking back once.

Finally, he settled into his seat and reached into his backpack for his book... when he heard a crinkle from inside. He looked in and realized with horror that the bag of cookies—the original bag he had bought from the convenience store—was sitting there in his backpack, *unopened* and full. Which could only mean that the bag of cookies back at the gate, sitting between him and the woman—the bag he had shamelessly been eating from—was hers all along.

And that's a story about judging others when we shouldn't.

One group in the Bible that's constantly being called out for this kind of unselfconscious judgmentalism is the Pharisees. By the time Jesus came along, the Pharisees were the Jewish religious teachers in Jerusalem, and keepers of the oral tradition passed down from Moses. In a country that had been conquered by the Romans and their gods, the Pharisees were among the groups that maintained and interpreted the religious beliefs and traditions of the conquered Jewish populace. While they were technically middle class, drawn from the common people, in the ancient

world education and influence did often lead to privilege and power, so while not the *highest* muckety-mucks in the land, we see in the Pharisees some inherent elitism and self-possession.

You'll notice a lot that the Christian Bible portrays them as prideful—and at times out-of-touch—*hypocrites*, who denied, challenged, and ultimately *condemned* Jesus Himself. The overall attitude the Gospels *take* toward the Pharisees is that they're not the good guys. They're certainly not the *baddest* of the bad guys... more like an embarrassing foil for Jesus to prove himself against.

They're not the Romans, or Herod, or Judas, or Satan... but the general narrative seems to overlook the few times Jesus *applauds* a Pharisee, or how *integral* they were to keeping the Jewish faith *alive* in an impossible time. In fact, after Jesus was *gone* and what would become Christianity started pulling away from mainstream Judaism, the Pharisees were the one group that was able sustain itself and evolve into the Jewish faith that exists today.

So when I talk about the Pharisees this morning, I don't want us to be thinking about them in terms of "good" or "bad." Just like *all* the characters in the Bible, and all characters in life, they have shades of light and dark all the way through. They're complicated. Heck, the Gospel of Mark says a lot of the same things about Jesus' own *apostles* that we're used to hearing about the Pharisees. If you look hard enough the Bible gets around to calling pretty much *everybody* ignorant obstructionist hypocrites at least once.

With all that in mind, let's look at our Gospel story for today. We heard about two characters praying at the temple in Jerusalem. One, a member of the religious elite; the other, an employee of the Roman occupation who collects money from the Jews for the government, and skims his own percentage off the top in the bargain. The Pharisee notices the tax collector (who *nobody* likes), and gives his prayer thanking God that he's a decent man and an upright Jew. The tax collector, meanwhile, knows exactly how messed-up he is, and begs upon the righteousness of God to be merciful to him. Jesus then tells us that the best example for us in that story—the "good guy" if you will—is the tax collector, because while he has his sins, he knows it and comes before God with humility, seeking to change his ways. The Pharisee is a pompous so-and-so that can't see his *own* faults and will get what's coming to him.

Now, remember what I said, the Pharisees aren't really "bad guys," despite what some of the Gospel writers may have felt. They're *complicated* guys, with a lot of good to them. We, *all* of us, are complicated people with a lot of good to us. Because as often as you hear from the preachers or read in the Bible that we *are* indeed sinners, it *is* true that we are decent people *too*.

So this morning let's put ourselves in the shoes of the Pharisee.

"Two people went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

We are decent people. We go to church. We give to the church offering when we can. We volunteer for the fair and the food pantry and the pumpkin patch and coffee hour and Youth Group and reading Scripture on Sundays. We’re kind to our neighbors. We don’t rob banks or mug strangers or rape or embezzle. Our sins are smaller and we listen when God tells us we have some work to do on ourselves.

We are good people. There *is* good in you. This isn’t the sin of pride, and I’m not trying to bait-and-switch you here. It isn’t said enough, especially from a lot of pulpits: you’re *not* a stinking cesspool or an embarrassment of God’s holy Creation. You aren’t drooling wolves held back by a fraying leash. If you believe it, I want to hear you say with me, “I am a good person.”

Together: “I am a good person.” This isn’t an exercise. If you get nothing else from this sermon I want you to have had at least one real moment where you legitimately believed you are good enough. You are a good person.

So often the Bible has us start from pond scum and work our way up. We *are* all a little scummy in our own ways, but as humble New Englanders it’s easy for us to forget or overlook the times Scripture *and* Jesus tell us we actually are good, beloved, and worthy children of God.

And because, like the Pharisees, we are also *complicated* people, and because the Bible *also* says “There is none righteous, no, not one,” it *is* important for us to look inside ourselves and see what we can find.

Because we’re no stranger to the other side of the Pharisee’s prayer in Luke 18. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

We are good, upright people, but *man* can we judge. We *all* have people we judge in this world. Maybe it’s people who make less money than us or who depend on the support of others. Maybe it’s people who make *more* money than us, or get paid for jobs we think don’t deserve so much. Maybe it’s people who smoke marijuana.

Maybe it’s people who are loud and abrasive, or maybe it’s people who are too politically correct. Maybe it’s people who just look shifty, or maybe it’s someone who actually has wronged us in the past. Maybe it’s those kids these days who won’t pull their damn pants up. Maybe it’s people who have too much sex or dress too “provocatively.” Maybe it’s the young people who think they know it all already. Maybe it’s the old people who are so *out of touch*. Maybe it’s those callous, hypocritical conservatives or those domineering, hypocritical liberals.

Did I get at least one that struck true for you in there?

I know I can’t turn on the *news* these days without seeing somebody *I* judge. We *all* have the tendency to judge people. To condescend to them. To compare ourselves favorably to them. It comes with being good people. We *are* good people, and we have the right to know that.

But we *don't* have the right to decide who *isn't*.

Only God has that right.

For one thing, we don't always *know* what's good and what isn't. And besides that, it's just plain toxic. We do *harm* to others when we judge them, and we do harm to ourselves. The Pharisee in the parable wasn't the bad example to Jesus *just* because he wasn't humble. He was *also* the bad example because he judged the tax collector.

The tax collector wasn't the good example to Jesus *just* because he was *repentant*. He was *also* the good example because he focused on judging *himself*, *instead* of the self-righteous hypocrite praying over there.

Our instinct when we encounter something we dislike or disapprove of or distrust is to impose judgement on it, even if we never open our mouths. God calls us to a higher way. God calls us to take that judging instinct and refocus it on ourselves. Find where we are lacking, find where we need work, find what it is inside of us that makes us feel so negatively about our fellow child of God, whether they deserve that judgement or not. Because it isn't for *us* to judge who are rogues or what is adultery or why someone steals or what kind of person a tax collector is. All that does is darken our souls and put up walls around us.

No doubt at *some* point this morning or over the last couple of years *you* found yourself judging *me*. Maybe you felt I was too young to make some assertion. Maybe you heaved a sigh because I was talking about gay rights or Muslims or African Americans again. Maybe you thought a sermon was too long or a prayer was annoying or I joked too much or picked a bad hymn. Maybe it's my shoes or my '90s hair or my bad skin or the fact that for the life of me I can't keep my *stole* on straight.

Judging happens. It's *natural*. We are still good people. But the first step toward being *better* people is recognizing reality. Noticing those moments when we judge people, and stopping to *inspect* those judgements. Why did I just think that? Where did it come from? Once we've mastered that, we can start to figure out what kinds of people or groups of people or actions or lifestyles it *is* we judge. We can recognize the little acts of unrighteousness those judgments are, and in turn discover their consequences. And we can get better at turning that magnifying glass back on ourselves, where it belongs.

So the next time we find ourselves judging someone, or a group of someones—and we *will* at some point—*recognize* it. Take it out and inspect it from all sides. Where is that judgment coming from? Is it fair? And most importantly is *judging* the best way to deal with it?

The Pharisee was happy enough to sit there, content in the knowledge that he was good and the tax collector had done something wrong. *We're* the Pharisee now. What should we do instead?

Amen.