

Title: Parables Playing on Our Expectations  
Date: 10/23/2022 (Proper 25, Year C)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Joel 2:23-32](#); [Psalm 65](#); [2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18](#); [Luke 18:9-14](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/AvON5Aj8vI8?t=1605>

Awesome things will you show us in your righteousness,  
O God of our salvation,  
O Hope of all the ends of the earth  
and of the seas that are far away. (Ps 65:5)  
Amen.

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi walk into a bar. The bartender says, "What is this? A joke?"<sup>1</sup>

Jokes like this one play on our expectations. Whether or not we find them funny depends on how familiar we are with the clichés about priests, ministers and rabbis, aaaaaand on how we feel about those cliches. Based on popular culture, firsthand experience, and familiarity with these kinds of jokes, once we hear those opening words, we might have assumptions about what each of them might say, how each of them might act, and what will happen at the end.

Today's parable starts in much the same way. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector" (Lk 18:10).

If this was a nature special on the National Geographic Channel, a narrator would say in a very deep and dramatic voice, "Pharisees ... are the natural enemies of tax collectors."

Over and over the Pharisees complain about Jesus eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners (Lk 5:30; 7:34; 15:1-2), equating the two.

Here are some things we learn about the Pharisees in the gospel according to Luke.

- We hear Jesus denounce them, "[W]oe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; is it these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others" (Lk 11:42).
- We see Jesus use them as a cautionary tale. He tells his disciples, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy" (Lk 12:1).
- We learn over and over that the Pharisees seem to miss the point when it comes to the Sabbath. They stayed silent even when Jesus asked them, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath?" (Lk 14:3).

Sense a pattern here? I could go on, but if I were to ask you, "What do you know about Pharisees?" These would likely be some of the examples that come to mind.

It probably won't surprise you then that the Pharisees became very hostile toward Jesus. They looked for every opportunity to cross-examine him. They lay in wait for him, hoping to catch him in something he might say (Lk 11:53-54).

On the other hand, even though tax collectors are agents of the Roman Empire, at least they had been baptized by John the Baptist (Lk 3:12; 7:29), even as the Pharisees refused to be baptized by John (Lk 7:30).

Here are some other things we learn about tax collectors in the gospel according to Luke:

- Early in his ministry Jesus called a tax collector (named Levi in Lk 5:27-29, named Matthew in Mt 9:9) to be his disciple, but he didn't call Paul, the most Pharisee of Pharisees, until after his death and resurrection.
- Tax collectors got close to Jesus to listen to him (Lk 15:1), not to set him up or criticize him.
- While they were not on the margins in the same way as the poor and the captives, the widows and those who were ill, among certain groups of people, they were on margins socially.

Again, notice the pattern here.

By the time we get to chapter 18 of the gospel according to Luke, once the two characters in this parable have been identified, we can guess where this is going. The final words seal it, "[F]or all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Lk 18:14).

Clearly, the Pharisee in this parable is exalting himself. The tax collector is humbling himself. Pharisee bad, tax collector good. Justification by works, believing we can earn our salvation, bad; justification by faith, putting our hand in the hand God extends to pull us closer, good.

Be the tax collector, don't be the Pharisee.

Mic drop. Print that bumper sticker.

And yet...

Let's look again at today's passage from the Gospel.

It begins with, "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (Lk 18:9).

Given what we've learned about the Pharisees and tax collectors in this very gospel, it's tempting to assign the role of those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" to the Pharisees.

But what if Jesus is talking about the listeners?

What if Jesus is offering a course correction to the disciples?

What if Jesus' warning is directed at **us**?<sup>2</sup>

These are the questions asked by Amy-Jill Levine in *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. She works very hard to peel back centuries of interpretation. Her goal is for us to receive this parable the way those who heard this, or some version of this, from the mouth of Jesus would have received it.

For example, while some of us might identify with the tax collector after reading Luke, first century Jews would have seen him as an agent of Rome and not an agent of God.<sup>3</sup> They would see hypocrisy in his actions, asking God for mercy while offering none to the people he collected taxes from. He beats his breasts and makes a public confession as the Jews do in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, but will he do more than that to show that he's actually serious about atoning for his sins?

While some of us might associate Pharisees with hypocrisy, the majority of Jesus' Jewish audience would have respected them as teachers, as those who walked the walk as well as talked the talk.<sup>4</sup> Paul himself took pride in being born and educated as a Pharisee; it was part of his credentials (Acts 23:6). It's a big reason he was invited to preach at synagogues. Those who first heard this parable would have seen this Pharisee as a super Pharisee, one who is fasting and giving more than required.

Levine shares this note of caution, "Once we negatively judge one character and promote the other **the parable traps**. The problem with this view is that it prompts exactly the same type of dualistic judgments that Jesus speaks against."<sup>5</sup>

What if the point isn't to judge the Pharisee and the tax collector, but to be humble enough to learn from them?

After all, the Pharisee gives thanks and praise to God. He knows that he's not in this position because of something he did. This is not something he earned. So, he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of his income not to earn the grace of God but **in response** to the grace of God.

Perhaps he is thankful that he is not like those others because he knows he couldn't have handled the kind of life circumstances that drive people to become thieves, rogues, adulterers, or tax collectors.

As for the tax collector, perhaps he is already taking a huge leap to believe that he can be right with God, despite his job. He knows there is a possibility that people at the Temple might point and whisper, but he is willing to trust that God will make *something* happen if he comes and prays.

When we judge the Pharisee and the tax collector, we end up exalting ourselves. We put ourselves in the position to decide which one could be made right with God. The Greek word for "rather than," as in "this man went to his home justified **rather than** the other" can also mean "alongside" or even "because of."<sup>6</sup>

But along the way some translators decided that Jesus couldn't have *possibly* meant "this man went to his home justified **alongside** the other" or "this man went to his home justified **because of** the other."

Why place limits on who can be made right with God?

Even the person writing as Paul, super Pharisee Paul, super Apostle Paul, tells Timothy that the crown of righteousness that the Lord has reserved for him will not only be given to him but to **all** who have longed for the Lord's appearing. Fighting the good fight, running the race, keeping the faith, all of that looks different for each of us. All of that might even look different for each of us from day to day!

Why couldn't seeking to be right with God be a team effort? How might our rightness with God depend on one another?

The prophet Joel has this vision that God will pour out God's spirit on all flesh. "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days I will pour out my spirit" (Joel 2:28-29). He was speaking just to the people of Israel, but there is this notion that the circle *has to* become ever wider, that God is always drawing the circle to include more and more people.

We may not think we're exalting ourselves, but when we are busy judging, we won't hear the prophecies spoken by our children and youth. When we are busy judging, we won't follow the wisdom of our elders or the creative visions of those who are new. When we see others as less than, because of their job or political views or any other reason that seem acceptable to us, when we see OURSELVES as less than, we won't see the ways in which the Holy Spirit is moving in and through and among us.

Throughout church history, the church has lost out when it put boundaries around who could receive the grace of God and who the Holy Spirit could work through. With the Doctrine of Discovery, white Europeans gained a lot of land and resources but lost out on the Holy Spirit when the pope declared that the people who lived in the Americas were pagans and therefore not fully human, so they could consider this land uninhabited. It was issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 and has been cited in the US Supreme Court as recently as 2005 to limit tribal sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> As we've seen over this last year, these last decades, these last centuries, this is not a trend limited to indigenous people.

So, let us beware easy answers and be conscious of everything that shapes what we read and how we read. Jesus didn't tell this parable to give us permission to judge who is worthy, who is exalting themselves, and who is humble. We must also beware making things so complicated that we go so far down a rabbit hole that we forget why Jesus is telling this parable in the first place.

Our salvation depends on God, and in addition to the Holy Scripture and the rich traditions of our faith and cultures, God has given us one another. Each of us are created

in the image of God and each of us is a sign pointing toward God. May we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to embrace and receive the prophecies, the wisdom, and the visions all around us. May we encourage those we know and love to do the same.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2011/12/08/a-priest-and-a-rabbi-walk-into-a-bar>

<sup>2</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. p. 186

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208

<sup>7</sup> [Sherrill v. Oneida Opinion of the Court - Doctrine of Discovery](#)