

Messiah Moravian Church
October 23, 2022
Proper 25, Year C
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Luke 18:9-14

Two Kinds Of People?

“There are two kinds of people in this world...”

Whenever we hear that phrase, we know the punch line of a joke or a witty observation is coming.

There are two kinds of people in this world – there are those who wake up in the morning and say, “Good morning, Lord,” and those who wake up in the morning and say, “Good Lord, it’s morning.”

Actress Marlo Thomas explains that the two kinds of people in this world are “the givers and the takers. The takers may eat better,” she explains, “but the givers sleep better.”

Here’s Woody Allen’s two cents’ worth: “There are two types of people in this world: the good and the bad. The good sleep better, but the bad seem to enjoy the waking hours much more.”

On the surface, Luke’s parable also suggests that there are two kinds of people in this world: Pharisees and tax collectors.

What happens in this parable is what many of us might expect. We are so accustomed to hearing that Pharisees are self-righteous and judgmental of others. When we think of the tax collectors, we usually remember how Jesus welcomed them, even though the Jewish community considered them extreme outsiders. Unsurprisingly, Jesus commends the tax collector who goes to his home justified rather than the Pharisee.

Luke’s message is obvious. There are two kinds of people in this world: humble ones like the tax collector, and prideful, hypocritical, and judgmental ones like the Pharisee. It’s an easy sermon to hear and swallow.

But Pharisees and tax collectors were not nearly as one-dimensional as we might believe. The Pharisees were actually the progressives of their day. They maintained a liberal interpretation of Scripture and recognized that the Law could be adapted, based on the changeability of life. They cared deeply about their faith and community. Like Martin Luther, they believed that everyone in the faith, not just priestly elites, should have access to the Torah and should be able to observe it. So they advocated for and established a free, universal Jewish education system accessible for all, including the average person. Had Jesus been more philosophically moderate, he could have been a Pharisee.

On the other hand, tax collectors were outsiders and excluded from the Jewish community. Most tax collectors were Jews who collaborated with the despised Roman Empire. The Jewish community viewed these tax collectors as traitors who chose to help the oppressive government rather than fight it. Tax collectors’ salaries were offensively high to the Jewish community who knew that they gained their wealth from fellow Jews. Many frequently cheated even the most vulnerable in society. They took more money than Rome demanded and pocketed the extra. Yet Jesus welcomed tax collectors, dined with them, forgave them and offered them a new life. In Luke’s parable the completely repentant tax collector goes home justified.

Isn’t it easy to identify the self-righteous, prideful, and judgmental “Pharisees” around us, especially in times like these? If we’re honest, haven’t there been times when we have thought how thankful we are that we are not like those other people over there? Like those legalistic church-goers or those un-

committed Christians? Those particular Moravians or those evangelicals? Those Republicans or those Democrats?

Our best-intentioned prayers of thanksgiving can slip into self-congratulation, just as our most generous acts of giving can become self-aggrandizing. This is true not only for individuals but also for congregations and even entire denominations. Soon we are thanking God that we “are not like other people,” not like other congregations, not like other denominations. Pride can take so many forms. “God, we thank you that we are not like the fundamentalists.” “God, we thank you that our social attitudes are progressive.” “God, we thank you that we know our weaknesses and admit them, not like the Pharisee.” But isn’t that the very same thing that the Pharisee is doing in Jesus’ parable?

The noted preacher Will Willimon wrote about this parable, “Jesus says, before any altar of God, in any service of worship, you mainly find two sorts of folk - Pharisees and publicans. A few of us are one or the other all of the time. But most of us are some of each, some of the time. There are times when we enter to worship as good, Bible-believing, righteous Pharisees who ask nothing and get nothing. We are so pleased with ourselves, so competent, so well fixed. We go home to Sunday dinner with a gnawing emptiness because we were so full before we came. But there are also times in life when we enter this place to worship as publicans, needing everything, empty, lost, without hope and (surprise!) we return home with more than we dared to ask.”

Like most parables, there is more to the story than we might have originally assumed. As we start to wonder how we might fit into this parable, maybe we need to reshape our thinking about it. Maybe the question we should be asking ourselves is not, which of the two people are we most like? Perhaps the question we should be asking is, when do we see ourselves as the Pharisee and when do we see ourselves as the tax collector?

The author Tom Robbins nails it about the two kinds of people: “those who believe there are two kinds of people in this world and those who are smart enough to know better.”

Yes, there is just one type of person in this world: human. We are not either one type or another. We are both/and: both Pharisee and tax collector, both created good and in God’s image and yet fallen at the same time. As Martin Luther wrote, we are “simultaneously [both] sinner and saint.” Each one of us, no matter how great our faults, is a beloved child of God, with the ability to be redeemed and transformed by God’s grace.

In recent years we have witnessed such contentious local and national political campaigns. We have seen much unpleasantness, and I expect we will experience even more nastiness in the weeks and years ahead. Unfortunately, there is and will be a lot of mud and hatred thrown about. And while there are definitely places where hate is much stronger than others, it comes from all sides, affecting and hurting many people.

As Christians we are absolutely called to speak out against any and all forms of hatred, and we are called to do so with love. It may require tough love, a strong and firm love at times, but it is always love. Loving our neighbors with whom we strongly disagree means never losing sight of their humanity; never forgetting that they, like us, are both/and; reminding ourselves--repeatedly, if necessary--that above all, they are also, no matter what, beloved children of God.

As the humorist writer Dave Barry wrote, “There are two kinds of people in this world, and I am one of them.”