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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Today's lesson from Luke follows immediately after last week's parable on what I called "the widow's hutzpah," and, though it may not seem so on the surface, today's lesson picks up many of the same themes and leaves us with some of the same challenges as we try to interpret it. First, we have both the parable itself, one that Jesus probably used multiple times in his itinerant ministry; and, second, we have the framing of the parable by Luke as he sets it into his wider narrative for, as we learned last week, his largely gentile Christian audience. But, third, in addition to these usual textual challenges, trying to understand this parable today is perhaps further complicated by the fact that we naturally look at it through our Christian eyes. Imagine how we might react if, in our stewardship drive this fall, we had folks come to front of the church and say things about their stewardship that this Pharisee says about his own. We would be struck speechless, and likely offended. Finally, those of us from Protestant backgrounds may read this parable through a Reformation lens; that is, we might see the contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector as portraying a distinction between grace and works, with the Pharisee imagining he has been justified by his good works and the tax collector being in fact justified by his humble faith in God's grace. So, as the Brits say, we'll need to "sort" all this if we hope to capture at least some of what Jesus intended his followers to understand with this parable.

As we listened to the parable this morning, we likely heard it as a "religious" story of some sort—after all, the two men are standing in the Temple,

and the Temple was indeed the center of Jewish religious life at that time. But people in those days didn't separate religion from politics, or government, or even finance like we do today. Political power was intimately linked to the Temple's religious significance, and it also served as the treasury and a place to keep public records. On the contrary, at least one leading commentator (NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone*) suggests we should view this parable in much the same way as we viewed last week's parable—we should imagine the Pharisee standing in a court of law before God as a judge, telling his own story in order to make the best case he can in his effort to be justified or, as we heard last week, vindicated, by the judge.

Indeed, God is often pictured as a judge, not just in Jesus' teaching, but throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. This may create problems for us today because we (correctly) think of judges as maintaining their *impartiality* by their physical and metaphorical distance from us. On the other hand, we typically want a God who closer to us, more intimate, and, dare I say, more *partial*—that is, partial toward us and our needs.

Nevertheless, imagining a court setting may give us a better way to understand what's happening here: two men are appearing in court to make their cases, to tell their stories, before a judge. One, the Pharisee, is upright in most people's eyes—he certainly is upright in his own eyes—and the other one, the tax collector, is guilty and he knows it. Tax collectors made their living by taking whatever funds they could squeeze out of people over and above the taxes they collected for the Romans, and the system easily lent itself to corruption. Not only were the taxes themselves resented, but any Jew who collaborated with the Romans to help collect them, and made a comfortable living doing so, was doubly

resented. So, standing before God as judge, the tax collector throws himself on the mercy of the court, sincerely begging for forgiveness, whereas the Pharisee makes—from his own perspective, at least—a pretty good case for himself. The surprise, of course, is Jesus' view of the two men. He tells us that God, the "judge" in this case, rules in favor of the tax collector. Indeed, Jesus claims the tax collector is "justified" or, again, "vindicated," and you may recall from last week that being vindicated means that the judge found the tax collector's story more persuasive than the Pharisee's.

Now, I wonder whether we, from the perspective of our historical distance, can appreciate the depth of the surprise Jesus' followers would likely have felt at the conclusion of this parable. The Pharisees get a lot of bad press in the New Testament, and some of it was undoubtedly deserved—but not all of it. There were many good Pharisees, and Jesus was friends with some of them—he even visited them in their homes and ate with them once in a while. There were several different groups of Pharisees, but all of them, in their own ways, were sincerely trying to bring the teachings of the Torah into their everyday lives, to live as they believed God wanted them to live, not just when they were at the Temple, but throughout all aspects of their lives. Fasting and tithing were part of that effort, and Jesus does not condemn this Pharisee for these practices. Rather, he is criticized for exalting himself, for believing that God as judge will treat him partially, that is, will show him special consideration over the tax collector, a self-confessed sinner who humbles himself before God and begs for mercy. Luke's framing of this parable captures some of this when he suggests that the Pharisee, in his supposed righteousness, regarded others with contempt. We might say today that the Pharisee was criticized for not realizing that the very things he was

holding out to God as his justifying accomplishments were themselves the result of God's grace and, perhaps, the accident of his birth into a family of a certain social standing. He thus failed to see how he was *linked* to the tax collector in a common human bond. If he could have perceived that bond, it might have been the beginning of a deepening self-awareness that, in turn, would lead him to some level of humility and, finally, to his own genuine justification or, again, vindication.

We'll hear more on these themes as we move through Luke, who seems to have a special concern for those on the fringes of society, but for now I want ask us to remember this word vindication. It came up last week, and it will come up again. In fact, if we want to understand what Jesus was about we'll need to understand this term. As we learned, it's related to our words for justice and righteousness, but it's perhaps not as abstract as those terms. Vindication is closely related to the kind of story that was being told by, and about, Jews and about their special relationship to God, and about how Jesus and his followers fit into this story. Just to give you a hint about this now, Jesus' resurrection is understood as his own vindication. It is key to understanding what Jesus was about.

Today, however, I want to return to this view of God as judge, and I want to press us to reflect on the implications of both the impartiality and partiality of God, for God is presented as both impartial and partial in the Bible. Jesus himself captures God's impartiality metaphorically when he points out how God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Others captures it when the praise Jesus because he, like God, is no respecter of persons, that is, he doesn't discriminate between persons based on their social standing. However, this impartial view of

God seems to be contradicted by other statements of Jesus in, say, the Sermon on the Mount. Here, we are told not be anxious because God loves us more than the birds of the air—birds, we are told, that are themselves well cared for by God. This suggests that God is partial toward humans generally, favoring them over other creatures. Another, perhaps more important way that God seems partial is in the covenant God made with the Jews themselves. They are God’s chosen people, called and elected by God to serve God’s purposes for the entire world; after Jesus, some Christians came to believe that they share this role as well. What might we make of this contradiction or tension?

On the one hand, we might observe that God’s impartiality does not mean that God does not loves or care for us as individuals or as human beings more generally, but it does imply that God loves and cares for each of us equally. God does not love me more, say, because I’m a priest and you’re a layperson. And God does not love us more because we’re Christians and others are, say, Muslims or even agnostics. On the other hand, God’s partiality, God’s special regard for Jews and, perhaps, Christians as well, obviously does not mean that they and we won’t suffer, that we will always be protected from random harms or the actions of others. We pray and hope for such protection, and we may receive it at times, but we all know it’s not guaranteed. And yet, even these unwanted events do not mean that God does not love us or care for us as individuals, though they do suggest that God has purposes for us that may not always include protecting us from harm.

We could say much more about this—as we can see, the tension between God’s impartiality and partiality quickly raises what we call the problem of evil and unjust suffering. For now, I want to return to today’s parable and its lesson

for us. As much as God may love and care for us, this parable suggests that God's love and care give us no warrant for looking down on others whom God loves just as much. Oh, we may disagree with each other, we may even argue, but because of God's impartial love for all, we should not despise others or treat them with contempt. This includes those close to us: our spouses, other family members, and those in our church family. But it also includes those not close to us: those with whom we differ in the political realm comes to mind in this election cycle and, as Jesus also says in the Sermon on the Mount, even those who are our enemies. We should pray for our enemies, he tells us, that we might better come to see their common humanity.

So, to get personal, do we want to leave church today—our “Temple”—to go to our own homes vindicated, that is, feeling good about ourselves in God's eyes and our place in the world? If so, hear the parable that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. If we understand it as I believe we were intended to, it is not an easy lesson to hear—and perhaps even harder to put into practice. Amen.