



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 27, 2019
JEREMIAH 14:7-10,19-22; PSALM 84:1-6; 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8,16-18; LUKE 18:9-14

LIBERATING ASSUMPTIONS

Luke 18:9-14 [Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men 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.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."]

Today I'd like to invite you to examine assumptions we make about ourselves and others, and especially, the assumptions we make about God. Because I believe that Jesus's life was about liberation, and one of the ways he went about that work was by dismantling judgmental assumptions that trapped people in small-minded religion.

Studies show that within seconds of meeting someone, we've already made assumptions about how trustworthy they are, how good a leader they are, whether we like them or not, and about how much money they make. Most of the time the assumptions we make about

others determine whether we can trust them or not.ⁱ

But our assumed biases and stereotypes also have a cost. They limit how we listen to each other, how we include others in the stories we tell about ourselves, and even what images we call to mind when we think about God.

This is how good, Christian people accidentally imagine God as an old, judgmental white man in the sky who demands good deeds in exchange for blessing. It's also how we can participate in social assumptions like

white supremacy or classism without even realizing it. Over time, unexamined assumptions become sources of isolation and shame that bind us in profound ways and plug our ears from hearing anything new.

Jesus knew that, and he sought to liberate us by upending our assumptions and waking us up to the subconscious stories we tell about ourselves. The parable we hear from Luke today is like an intervention; a tool for divine liberation.

Here is the context: Jesus addressed some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. But it's also important to note the context that isn't given: Jesus's audience was likely a community of followers, eager to be taught and challenged. Furthermore, this group was an oppressed group of Jewish people seeking to live as God intended in the power-hungry Roman empire. Both of the men Jesus describes in the parable are members of this faithful community, anchored in a shared history of struggling with God in prayerful relationship. They are different, but they are not enemies.

The Pharisee is probably a good, upstanding man, dedicating his life to justice and communal leadership. He prays by reciting his spiritual practice resume to God. He is successful according to every definition in the

Torah, and that's how he knows he's better than other people. We wince at his comparison, but we've all done it: "Thank God I'm not like them."

Tax collecting was a contemptible occupation in the Jewish community at the time. The tax collector's work required him to solicit Roman taxes from his own neighbors. It was not uncommon for people in his position to take a little off the top for their own personal gain. Even if this particular tax collector didn't personally swindle his neighbors, even if he felt forced by the circumstances of his life to make a living in an unseemly way, it is unlikely that anyone would have assumed him to be good. But he, too, goes to the Temple and prays beside the Pharisee in the long tradition of the Psalms and Lamentations.

Then the story upends, as all good parables do, and we are left with a collaborator to the Empire justified by God, a good man justifying himself, and an admonition about being humble. It would have been a startling end for Jesus's original audience, and with good reason.ⁱⁱ

I have to confess that Jesus's story doesn't startle me anymore. I've heard it so many times that I assume pious Pharisees are always the bad guys in the Bible. Many a Christian commentary has extolled God's relentless grace and mercy to the undeserving Tax

Collector and that's good. But rarely does the skewering of self-righteous religious leaders produce more mercy in my life.

Besides, in today's world, we ARE the Pharisees. We, too, engage in spiritual practices with special intention, believing they will make us, well, better! The thing is, spiritual practice is not about being better. It's about being connected and free. Stewardship, for example, is, at its best, a spiritual practice of liberation from assumptions of self-sufficiency and economic commodification. Pledging our wages connects us to our community and to God's generosity in tangible ways. But it can accidentally become another religious rule to follow, or a way to affirm ourselves as better. When we become trapped in that pattern, we miss something profound and liberating: we miss God in the midst of us, delighting in our very being, beckoning us to respond in kind.

Another assumption Jesus confronts here is the idea that God is impressed by good deeds. For those of us who have grown up assuming that Christianity is about "doing the right thing," this assumption is particularly hard to let go of. But it's worth it, because when we idolize our good deeds, we don't connect to other people very well. We miss the chance to see God's image in those we assume to be less capable of doing good in the world than we

are. Then, trapped in assumptions that justify ourselves, we leave little room for God's mercy and belonging to flourish in our lives.

If Jesus were to tell us a liberating parable today, who would he tell us about? I don't pretend to know, but here is one idea: Christena Cleveland, a black theologian and social psychologist, tells the storyⁱⁱⁱ of a group of evangelical white upper class moms who called to get her advice about increasing the diversity of a mom's prayer group in their community. The neighborhood school was diverse, they explained, but the moms' group was not. So the group's leaders had been trying to connect with Hispanic and low income families living in an adjacent neighborhood. It was a good idea, but despite many invitations, they had not succeeded in getting anyone to join. In their failure to connect, the leaders had assumed that advocating and praying for children was just not a priority for their neighbors.

"What about your life makes it possible for you to meet at 11 a.m. on a Thursday morning?" Dr. Cleveland asked the leaders.

"Well, we love our kids," one leader explained, "and so we've made the decision with our partners to stay at home and prioritize our family life."

“That’s not the right answer, Dr. Cleveland said, and then she suggested that the group of leaders immerse themselves in the lives of their Hispanic neighbors for a few months, to see if they could answer the question differently. So, these evangelical white moms started taking their families to the nearby Hispanic church, instead of driving to the mostly white megachurch across town. They discovered that many in that community were working three or four jobs to make ends meet. Most were dependent on public transportation. All of them loved their kids as much as they did.

After a few months, one of the leaders called to report back. She explained that they had changed their meeting time to 11p.m. They were meeting in the homes of those who couldn’t afford childcare. And in addition to supporting their students together, the moms’ prayer group had started advocating for immigration reform. Then, the leader said, “For the first time in my life I have flesh on my bones. How was I living before? How did I know God before?”

The good news is that life can be different for *all of us* when we let go of our assumptions and receive the “frighteningly free gift of God’s presence.”^{iv} Social assumption-busting is slow, messy work, and we need it today at least as much as Jesus’s original band of followers. But it’s not a hustle. It’s a letting go- a liberation.

In just a few moments, we will stand together and say profound words about Jesus’s death, I resurrection, and life. Our worship frees us from the idea that we can do any of this spiritual work alone, and it tempts us to give up our assumptions for something upending and truly life-giving. If such a messy hope unsettles you, you are not alone.

ⁱ <https://www.businessinsider.com/science-of-first-impressions-2015-2> or read the entire study here:

[http://www2.psych.utoronto.ca/users/rule/pubs/2017/Tskhay_etal\(2017_LO\).pdf](http://www2.psych.utoronto.ca/users/rule/pubs/2017/Tskhay_etal(2017_LO).pdf)

ⁱⁱ Additional context for this parable found in Amy Jill Levine’s book, *Short Stories of Jesus*

ⁱⁱⁱ Originally told by Christena Cleveland at the Conspire Conference in 2016, session 4, which may be accessed here: <https://cac.org/events/webcasts/upcoming-webcasts/conspire-2016-webcast/>

^{iv} Aside from this quote, many of the ideas noted here are heavily influenced by *The Dream of God: A Call to Return*, by Verna Dozier.

