Sunday, October 28, 2001
BAD AND GOOD RELIGION
Luke 18:9-14

There are times when it appears that the main purpose of religion is to separate people into two main categories: the bad people and the good people, the damned and the saved. The so-called “holy” wars throughout history have been based on this assumption. In such an understanding, one does what one has to do in order to be counted among the saved, even when that means killing the people you believe to be the infidels and the unrighteous in order to get your reward.

Most of us who claim to be religious would not go to this extreme. There are more subtle ways religion is used to separate those we believe to be outside the reach of God’s love from those we believe are inside — those who are saved and those who are damned. Some believe they are included in God’s community because they have followed all of God’s rules exactly. Others are excluded because they have not followed all the religious rules. And there are those who separate themselves from others by claiming they perform all the religious rituals exactly as prescribed, while others do not. For still others, it means using only certain words to describe their beliefs, and if others do not use the same words, they are not accepted by God. They are not on the inside. For example, in this kind of system, the only correct metaphor for God is “Father,” never “Mother.” Bad religion frequently separates insiders from outsiders by dress, behavior, and vocabulary. Bad religion emphasizes exclusiveness, while good religion emphasizes inclusiveness.

The mistaken tendency for religious people to want to decide who is inside and who is outside is one of the major themes in Luke’s gospel. It is one of the treacherous undercurrents of the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector. It’s a story about two religious men who go into the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, and the other is a tax collector. Both men came out of a tradition which, like ours, took it for granted that prayer is not a substitute for right living, but ought to be its inspiration, blessing, and help to tell the difference between right and wrong.

The Pharisee is a man who is in dead earnest about his service to God. After all, you can tell at once whether a person is serious about the practice of his religion when it touches his stomach or his pocketbook. The Pharisee, according to Jesus, fasted and sacrificed. He tithed on his income before taxes. For him, God was at least as real as the money in his billfold and his bank account.

He was the kind of person that churches even today depend on. He helps pay the bills and is faithful in every way. I’d love a church full of people with his devotion — people who care enough to be faithful in their commitments, people who tithe on their income and thank God that they can.

As in Jesus’ day, it’s people like the Pharisee who hold the community together and keep the faith alive. In his desire to please God, this man is in the top three or four percent. The Pharisee works faithfully and sacrificially to preserve the community and its traditions. His piety sets him apart... really. In spite of all of his good qualities, his kind of piety is his major problem.

On the other hand, don't think of the other guy as some sort of spiritual hero. That's too easy. The tax collector exerts a corrupting influence on the community. He is precisely what he claims to be: a sinner. There is no hint in the story that, following his prayer of confession, he will go home and quit his job. Maybe tomorrow he will again take money and put some aside for himself.

The one man is certain that his righteousness gives him an "in" with God. The other is certain that his sinfulness leaves him out. They are both wrong. For Jesus, the purpose of religion was never to separate good people from bad people. Why then does Jesus proceed to praise the tax collector and not the Pharisee?

Sometimes our standard answer is that everything looks quite different in God's eyes than ours. But this only causes more questions. Is our judgment of no value at all? Does God always turn our judgments upside down? What kind of God is this who accepts the prayer of the tax collector and not the prayer of the Pharisee?

One of the best ways to understand this story and apply it to your life and mine is to admit that both characters are to be found in each one of us.

There are many of you listening this morning who have accomplished something good — who, in your home or profession, have dealt honestly with others when you could have cheated. You try to do your best. And there are also those listening who have not been able to control your urges or desires. Maybe you have been underhanded when you were too consumed with ambition. You are not always totally pleased with yourself.

The point of the story is not to see the tax collector as honorable and the Pharisee as a creep. Jesus knew that his listeners then and now can easily fall into the trap of the Pharisee and pray, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, atheists, or members of the wrong church." We can also fall into another trap and pray, "I thank you, God, that I am not like this proud Pharisee: I am a sinner. That's the way human beings are and that's what I am. But at least I admit it, and therefore I am a little better than the rest of the lot. I'm a sinner who is as honest as I am."

Whether you are more like the tax collector or the Pharisee, if you claim to be religious, you need to be especially careful of the devout moments in your life. Even humility is a virtue which is not immune to temptation.

You've heard the old story of the Bible teacher who told his class the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, and after explaining it in some length, folded his hands and closed his presentation by saying, "Now students, let us thank God that we are not like that nasty Pharisee."

Note that there are a lot of similarities between the tax collector and the Pharisee. Both want to stand before God. Both are in the temple. They are not simply seeking God in nature. Many who do this are only looking for a warm religious feeling but otherwise want to remain as they are. The God of nature does little to judge or change them.

Both of the individuals in this story want more than this. They enter into the holy presence of God. They expose themselves to God's will, God's claim. They are not trying to escape into cheap non-commitment. Both give thanks that there is such a thing as the mercy of God — that they can approach God.

Why then did Jesus say that the tax collector's prayer was accepted by God and that the Pharisee's prayer was rejected? And what does this have to say to us as individuals and as a congregation as we look to the future?

It has to do with how each of these individuals sees themselves, and how church congregations see themselves, and how they each arrive at their self-understanding. If you want to know yourself, you must have a standard. And when this standard is chosen and applied, the differences between these two individuals become apparent.

The Pharisee measures himself by looking downward when he tries to determine what kind of person he is and his rank before God. He chooses the corrupt tax collector as his standard. Then, of course, the differences become obvious to him. Sure, the Pharisee knows he has his faults. He does not claim to be perfect. He knows the temptations that trouble him, but he has controlled them.

He doesn't give thanks that God has spared him from being a thief, adulterer, rogue, or tax collector; he gives thanks that he is not like them. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people...." Really? Here he moves from the grammar of gratitude into the grammar of excessive pride. It's a very fine line, and we don't always notice when we cross it, but we do it all the time. What betrays us is an unexamined refusal of kinship. It shows every time we use the "us" and "them" words.

You can sense the distance in the Pharisee's use of the phrase, "this tax collector." He has gone from good religion to bad religion. Good religion connects people; bad religion separates them. The Pharisee measures himself against a neighbor and is quietly pleased with the difference. Had the tax collector measured himself against the Pharisee and despaired at the difference, his prayer would've been just as false. It's the comparative mindset that is problematic.

The Pharisee is not challenged to make any improvements because he already considers himself so much better according to the standard he is using for measurement.

When I was growing up, there was a dairy company that advertised its product with the slogan, "Milk from contented cows." I do not know very much about cows, but I do know something about people. When you begin to measure yourself only by looking downward, by comparing yourself to someone you consider to be worse than you, it's easy to become content with yourself, even smug in your religion.

There's a story about a mountaineer who established quite a reputation for himself as a marksman with a rifle. Whoever followed him found target rings on trees and fences with a bullet hole in the center. Asked to explain the secret of his skill, he said, "It's easy. I just shoot and draw a circle around the hole."

It's always tempting to compare yourself to others by looking downward. That's one of the attractions of gossip. It's a strange delight to find comfort in discussing the misfortunes, the private weaknesses, and the sins of supposedly prominent people. Then you feel better about yourself, and you can say with a certain air of moral superiority, "Such things don't occur in my life." You want your own goodness to be confirmed, and you try to achieve this by being horrified at others.

In order to practice good religion, you have to be so careful in your prayers and in how you evaluate yourself. It doesn't help to compare yourself to someone you consider worse than you. Instead, you need to measure yourself against what God requires of you. You have to ask yourself, "How much of my gratitude is expressed in terms of action?" You have to be careful so that when you thank God that you live in a free land, have enough to eat, and money to live on, you do not conclude that this is because you are better than others who live with oppression, poverty, and illness. Then you may come to believe that you are especially blessed by God because you are more deserving than others. This leads to separation from others and is bad religion. Good religion leads to connections with others.

What is true for us as individuals is also true for Christian congregations. We are not to compare our congregation with other churches we consider inferior and therefore take pride that we are better. Rather, we have to ask: Is our congregation living up to what God requires of us? Are we fulfilling our ministry to the best of our ability?

My continuing vision for this congregation is that we will continue to carry out our ministries with all the talent and ability we have, and that we will do so joyfully and gratefully. My continuing vision for this congregation is that we will continue to be inclusive and welcome people, not exclusive and separate ourselves from others.

Now let me be very specific. In the mail this week, you will receive a letter from me, as you do late in the year, regarding our financial support for the coming year. Enclosed with the letter will be a pledge card, and I will be asking you to tell the church treasurer what you intend to give for the support of this church's ministries for the coming year, 2002. As you are deciding what your contribution will be, don't compare yourself with someone else that you think might be giving less than you and, since you are giving more, you feel satisfied. That's bad religion. That's measuring downward. That doesn't challenge you, and it leads to false pride. That tends to separate you from others and from God.

On the other hand, good religion leads to generous giving. It means measuring upward. You give cheerfully, proportionately, and regularly. That connects you to others and to God because you realize that you are doing the best you can do.

How will you measure yourself, not only in giving, but in all of life — by looking downward or looking upward? Amen.