

I tend to think that the Pharisees of the Bible get a bum rap. When you and I think of someone being Pharisaical we view them as hypocritical. And honestly, the Bible leads us to this kind of conclusion. Jesus even calls the Pharisees “hypocrites” on occasion. The Pharisees are for many of us people who say one thing and do another. But that is probably not historically accurate. This hypocritical analysis is probably the New Testament’s way of making a point by means of exaggeration.

In many ways, the Pharisees were the good guys. They represented a lay Jewish movement that was seeking reform for their religion. They were responsible for making sure that prophetic books like Isaiah and Micah were included in the Old Testament, books that advocated for the care of the poor and the underdog. The Pharisees generally did what they said they were going to do. The man praying in the temple in our text from Luke more than likely *did* give away ten percent of his income and *did* fast twice a week.

The Pharisees were the folks you enjoyed having around you. They did their jobs. They showed up early. They worked hard. They probably even mowed their lawns, raked their leaves, and cleaned up the messes their dogs made.

Yet Jesus, as he is reflecting on the prayers offered by the Pharisee and the tax collector, tells us that it was the tax collector who left the temple on good terms with God. The Pharisee, the guy who probably did all the right things, went home on bad terms with God.

But I thought that religion is fundamentally about doing good things. *What is* religion about if it is not about doing right and being

right? Isn't that why we train our young people? Isn't that why I preach sermons and teach classes? We want people to behave, right?

Well, maybe. The world seems like a better place when people behave. Chaos often is the result of bad behavior. Some people go to jail because they don't behave. I've been to many jails; I don't desire imprisonment for most people. So, is Jesus against behaving? Would he rather not have the Pharisee fast twice a week or give ten percent of his income?

Well, I hope not. This is the final week of our stewardship campaign. I don't think that downplaying the role of giving is a good idea on a day like this. The church could use a few more Pharisees. I often tell our former Reformed and Catholic folks that we love having them around because so often they *do* the faith. They show up. They come to worship. They frequently are good givers. Pastors love those kinds of people. We depend upon them. Is Jesus against doing good?

I don't think so. I suspect that in order to understand Jesus' point today we would do well to examine how Luke frames Jesus' words about the Pharisee and the tax collector. Luke writes: "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." The problem seems to be the comparison need. The problem seems to be what we trust.

There is something about doing all the right things that makes some of us prone to comparison and thus to judgment. There is something about doing all the right things that can cause us to focus our attention on us, our trust in ourselves, our trust in our performance.

I am not going to apologize for choosing to eat right or to exercise. Those are good choices, and frankly, more of us need to make those choices. I am not going to apologize for staying out of jail, for attending worship every week, for giving away 10 percent of my income, for not drinking when I am driving, for being on time, for keeping the house orderly, for following the pattern of marriage and then children, for staying away from illegal drugs. All of that is good and would probably serve many of us well.

But when my scorecard becomes what matters, when I start looking down my long nose at people who don't eat like I do or exercise as I do, when I regard others with contempt, then I become like the Pharisee. And let's be honest. Church people can be prone to looking down their long noses, because, frankly, we often are the behavers. We show up. We do a lot of things right. Too bad other people don't.

I had a young man in my office the other day who was honest with me to say that for a long time he had discounted most religion because when he was young, he was a part of church that made it quite clear what it meant to behave like a Christian. And while he hadn't done a bunch of horrible things, he knew himself well enough to feel as if he couldn't measure up to what was being expected. He sensed constant judgment. And you know what happens when we feel constant judgment. We react. We withdraw. We reject. We clearly aren't at our best.

I told the young man that, sadly, Christianity has been sold by some as a long list of do's and don'ts. To be Christian, you can't do this; you must do this. You better do that. You should do this. I told him that such a perspective on the faith is a perversion of our faith.

The hero in our story today is not the Pharisee who does everything right, but a hated tax collector who has gotten it wrong. A man who has cooperated with the evil Roman Empire, who has cheated poor people of their money by adding to their tax bills, is the one who is said to have gone down to his home in a good relationship with God. The hero is one who got it wrong.

Richard Rohr says, “we grow spiritually more by doing it wrong than by doing it right.” When we do it right, we often trust in ourselves and our accomplishments. When we do it wrong, we must seek help outside of our little egos and our little scorecards.

I remember a time in my high school career when I performed a trumpet piece for my home congregation, a piece that really challenged my abilities. Well, it showed. I messed it up royally. I gave up playing halfway through the song. I felt terrible. I hid from people. I slipped out the back door. I wanted to face no one. I was never going to play again. These folks knew me as a high performer. Now they knew me as a failure. I spent days mourning my failure, keeping away from people. My trumpet-playing days were finished.

It wasn’t long after that period of mourning that I talked to Nancy, the organist. She wanted to know when I was going to play again and what we could do together.

What? I had been a failure. I had gotten it wrong. But Nancy believed in mercy, not scorecards. While I was preoccupied with what I had done wrong, she wasn’t. She wasn’t looking down her long nose at me. She was moving forward. I had to swallow my pride, my ego, and admit I needed mercy.

This is why the tax collector is the hero. He knew he needed mercy. Again, listen to Rohr: “The only way to stay on the [Christian]

path with any authenticity is to constantly experience our incapacity to do it, our failure at doing it,” and I would add, our need for mercy.

“The tax collector would not even look up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I have gotten it wrong, and I need mercy. And trust me. The tax collector wouldn’t have spoken that truth, if he didn’t know that mercy was available. Mercy runs the universe. Mercy is the beginning truth, the middle truth, and the ending truth. And we all need it, every one of us, whether we behave or don’t. All our lives cry out for mercy.

So, why would we want to trust simply in ourselves and our righteousness? Why would we want to regard others with contempt? Why would we want to insist that the only way to live is on the basis of scorecards? What was the seedbed for the Reformation was Luther’s growing awareness that life is fundamentally not about the scorecard, but about mercy. And he concluded not that we shouldn’t do right things, but that we didn’t need to do them for the sake of the scorecard.

We don’t have to be number one. We don’t have to get it all right. We are simply called to trust in mercy. And when we do so, we will be a whole lot more merciful.