

Confronting Our Pharisees Within

By Rev. Audrey Connor

For Church of the Covenant October 27, 2013

Scripture: Psalm 65; Joel 2:23-32; Luke 18:9-14

I thank David for the invitation to share with you all this morning. It is an honor to be in this space with you on Sundays I am able to be here. And a greater honor still to give a bit of myself and my own reflections this morning. I feel very at home here. While I am just getting to know you all, I am astounded at the familiarity of the community of God – when sisters and brothers come together – it is sweet...

Whether you know it or not, we share a lot in common –

we share the underlying belief of Jesus the Christ – Jesus the brother, Jesus the prophet... the teacher... the understanding that this Jesus may have different names to us all...

And we share a belief in the presence of the Holy one ... especially known when we can slow down long enough to be present to Him or Her and to the earth.

This past year, I bought my first house with my now wife Miranda. We love it a lot – one of the best parts of it is that we have a lot of land and I love being with the earth. My weeks have been filled with cutting grass, weed eating, planting grass and flowers... and picking up trash!

... every week before I mow, I have to first collect all the litter from people who drive by on our busy street – [*hold up bag of litter*] this is the litter I collected yesterday....

I have been astonished at the amount of litter that happens just on our lot on a busy part of old forest...

I have seen McDonalds meals, empty cans of coke, bottles of beer, tissues, instruction manuals for appliances... cigarette butts, empty Greek yogurt containers, cigarette boxes, ... beer boxes... you name it – I have seen it since I move in...

And my inner mantra is often – Lynchburg – you slobs...

And I know it is not everyone... I know the values of this place...

I think the culminating moment for my distaste of so many litterers was when I was actually out on my mower cutting the grass when I heard the pounding on the pavement from a person who had JUST dropped the empty giant gallon coke – one of those Big Gulps.

What is wrong with you people? I professed aloud though the engine muffled my cry.

I may be a lot of things – but I thank God I am better than that idiot who threw out trash on the road!

Who is the tax collector for you?

I invite you to join the Pharisee this morning in this temple where shadows of our humanity haunt us too... these shadows of broken images of God... that we so don't want to imitate... we do bring those here to this place... shadows that can

guide us to be who God wants us to be and holding us back from who we know God hates.

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.
Our psalmist cries out on our behalf this morning.

We do know what God wants of us –

I think of psalm 1 - Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

I do thank you God that I am not like those litterers.

And if I am honest, there is a long list of people I am glad I am not like

Some would call the list of those people that are so easy to despise parts of our shadow side.

Sharon Grussendorff writes, “The shadow is anything that we can't or won't see about ourselves, the parts we feel so deeply ashamed of that we hide them from ourselves and others.” [we put that side on *other* people – so we can distance ourselves from it!] She goes on to say, “We have an amazing capacity for self-deception, so our shadows are often very well hidden. Because of this they tend to have a lot of power over us. A clue that we are acting out of this shadow side of ourselves is any time we react strongly to something, in a way that's disproportionate to the circumstance, or if we are too anti-anything. A very familiar example is when we feel righteous indignation about something, and have a burning need to rant about it, **or to have somebody agreeing us about it**. This is giving us a clue that there is something strong inside of ourselves that is unexpressed, and has found an outlet-valve.”ⁱ

It doesn't take long to know where Jesus is going when he starts this parable. An astute reader of Luke would know the set up as soon as it began.... Jesus who loves turning tables on the listeners to hear the unexpected... the Pharisee is *not* justified. Perhaps Jesus does this to help us see the pharisee's shadowside, or better – maybe it is to help us see our own shadows...

I wonder if it is because the Pharisee's inability to see the tax collector as a person that makes him unjustified

Or maybe it is simply that he is acting out of his unchecked shadow - arrogance that makes him think he is better than all others.

That tax collector would surely push anyone's buttons...

He cheats everyone with whom he in relationship

He benefits from an unjust system.

His contrition would make it worse - that he not only understands that the system he plays into is unfair but that he does it anyway!

What kind of assurance does anyone have that he would change and stop treating people unfairly?

It is said that the best predictor of future behavior is looking at past behavior.

But it is the tax collector who is justified.

Jesus does turn the tables on us again.

Where do you know you are meeting your shadow side in the world?

Who is the tax collector for you?

Last weekend I was visiting my family in Columbus, Ohio. After leaving the mall with my sister, we got in the car and my sister noticed a tract on my windshield.

Now I see these a lot in Lynchburg. And I have to admit it surprised me to get one in Columbus.

This one had random questions about God – questions like – “if God loves everyone, won’t we all go to heaven?” [according to this tract – no] and “isn’t love more important than obeying rules?” and john lennon’s question: “can’t we forget religion and just love each other?” and of course – “how can I be saved?”

The answers ranged from understanding that we can do nothing without God and that we are inherently sinful and we need god... - the only way we can get outside our sin? To accept Jesus “inside”. Here is a sample

“don’t let anyone convince you that love is more important than rules. That’s a lie. If a mom told her son to mow the grass and her son bought her flowers instead, she would say, ‘the flowers are nice, but I told you to mow the grass. Why didn’t you obey?’ when we obey, it shows that we really love. God has asked us to love Him enough to obey him. Those who obey God show that they really love him.”

As a minister....

As a disciple....

As someone who has met a lot of people for whom this understanding of Christianity has driven them away from God and Jesus instead of toward God...

A few buttons were pushed in me that day.

If I am honest, I may have thanked god that I have not given barriers of understanding of Jesus to people like them...

Thank you god – I am not like them... in my understanding of faith.

Where do you know you are meeting your shadow side in the world?

Who is the tax collector for you?

Our shadows are walking all over this earth – I believe it is important we get to know them

Even make friends with them....

This morning, we learn what it means to pray with them... in the temple... we learn what god wants us to do with them...

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.... I thank you I have values that help my kids,,, help America – that do not play into the sin in this world.... I thank god I am enlightened...

silence

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!'

This morning, we learn what it means to pray with our shadows... in the temple...
we learn what god wants ...

To bring all of ourselves to God... not just the parts of us unafraid to show up
here....

The good, the bad, ...

Even those parts that are ugly

Not that we distance ourselves from those shadows... but admit they are there...
in all of us... *we name it – not in our neighbor... but in ourselves.*

God be merciful to me, a sinner.

we name it – not in our neighbor... but in ourselves.

Who is the tax collector for you? It may help you see what you are afraid to see in
yourself...

A pretty special thing happened in my life just a couple short weeks ago – October
7, 2013, Miranda Cook and I went to Washington DC with a couple close friends
and family members and we were legally – I should say “federally” married.

We are planning on having a celebration with all of our families and close friends next year in Miranda's home of Kentucky... but as far as the United States govt and God is concerned, we are married.

Now I am sure that this is partly because of the political climate of our day... and because of how complicated it is to be married... or maybe because I am an excited newly wed, I think all the time about what this means in our lives. Here is the thing - as a baptized Christian, I participated in an outward and inward sign of my faith in the world. As an ordained minister, I publically accepted a call to live out my faith in the world publicly as a servant of Christ. But this marriage.... I believe it is different than those ceremonies.... It has little to do with who I will be in the world... it has little to do with my relationship to you all – the Christian community... or even to God – I have already shared with God my life – at least I have committed to try to do that... I am the same Audrey... but still we have said to each other and to god that we are no longer the people we once were... but instead... we are changed –

A change that does not change our placement in the world, ... but a change that involves all of our being ...

I am beginning to wonder if marriage is a model of our relationship with God...

God too, desires for us to bring all of ourselves to God - not just the parts we like – even the parts that are hard to live with... (just like marriage)

Our self-centered parts

Our ego driven parts

Our insecurity

The good, the bad, and the ugly...

God be merciful to me, a sinner.

You are justified, Jesus says

God be merciful to me, a sinner.

God receives you, Jesus says

I wonder if that is where the Pharisee's faith was weak-

Not so much that he could trust himself that he was righteous...

But that he did not trust God with the parts of himself that were not (righteous).

God be merciful to us, sinners.

I am so thankful to be with you all this morning, and as I share with you all my own tax collectors (and my own shadows), I am thankful more for a God who receives my small-minded faith and loves me still. I thankful for a God who is hell bent on loving me despite my inability at times to love others and for communities like this one that teach me not to stop coming before God with all of myself... because that is what God wants

Because the part that is not in this scripture but that I know from faith is that our God is a healing God. Who wants to take those parts of ourselves that are filled with hurt and anger and bring them peace.

As the prophet Joel shares the restoration of God to a hurting people, God wants to do the same with our devastations whether created by ourselves, by the lack of rain, or by our people... God desires to transform all of us

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God;

for God has given the early rain for your vindication,

God has poured down for you abundant rain,

the early and the later rain, as before.

And this is good news – because none of us are worthy. But God will always be.

So I invite you all to bring your tax collecting parts, bring your shadows, your limitations in love before God – join me with a contrite heart

God will give us peace, love, relief, and I believed that we will not walk away unchanged. amen

ⁱ <http://findingground.co.za/Home/Soul-Food/Shadow-Boxing>