

Ann Bonner-Stewart
St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Newton, MA
Proper 25C: Luke 18:9-14
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A couple of years ago, my family went on a tour at the Old Manse in Concord.
As I'm sure you know,
The Old Manse is a historic home stewarded by the Trustees,
right beside where the Battle of Bunker Hill happened.
As expected, we learned more about
some of the prominent folks who had lived there.

Our tour guide told us about Minister William Emerson, who
ministered at The First Church in Concord right before the American Revolution.
He was known as a one of the "Sons of Liberty,"
And Reverend Emerson preached fiery sermons
about freeing the colonies from England's tyrannies.

We also heard about Ralph Waldo Emerson,
influential transcendentalist, Minister Emerson's grandson.
He first drafted his well-known essay "Nature"
in an upstairs study at the Manse.

We learned of Sarah Bradford Rippley,
often referred to the most learned woman in the nineteenth century.
Expelled Harvard students would come to study with Rippley
So they wouldn't fall behind— and often claimed to leave
better educated than had they stayed in Cambridge.
This in a time when many women of her class
studied needlepoint and piano,
Not math and astronomy.

We came to the Manse with assumptions,
What with it being an important place a residence of luminaries
in the American Revolution and the Transcendental Movement.
We came to the Manse with preconceptions.

We all come to this story from the Gospel with preconceptions, too.

We hear this story in a very different way than Jesus' audience would have.

We hear Pharisees and automatically think "bad guy."

So it is well worth reiterating that the Pharisees would have been the "good guys"

In stories in this day and age and time and place.

And that stance, that the Pharisees are good guys, has merit.

The Pharisees work tirelessly to help the Judeans
around them keep the faith in a very difficult, trying time.

The Roman occupation was no joke.

Jesus' audience would be expecting to be told
To act like the Pharisee.

By way of contrast, the original audience would not want to identify w/ the tax collector.

Many still give the side-eye to tax collectors as a group today.

They're mildly unsavory.

But in Jesus' time tax collectors had gotten very wealthy

Extracting taxes from an impoverished peoples

And handing it over to the Romans,

who were the occupiers, the enemy.

Tax collectors were collaborators,

Plain and simple.

Perhaps we too can think of folks who have gotten wealthy

or even more wealthy by cozying up to the powers that be?

And if we can, is that someone we might imagine Jesus
would ask us to emulate?

This Pharisee in this story takes his faith seriously.

Tithing is serious business after all, not just posturing.

The problem is, from what we can tell, his contempt
for someone he knows little about— the tax collector—
based on his job.

Dividing people into categories and labeling is so easy.

& sometimes we think we've progressed beyond that, but, beloveds, we have not,
A lot is pushing us to divide and label right now in this country & this world.

Our brains, which are often so wonderful, are also masters at trying
to reduce cognitive load by labeling and categorizing.

These divisions are particularly painful right now.

And thinking we maybe don't label and don't categorize people

as much as other people do, like say people who live in other parts of our country,
Has not helped.

If you want to test this,

Go try some of Harvard's Implicit Bias Test online.

If you're breathing, you're breathing in the smog

That wants us divided from one another.

By using the stock characters he uses, Jesus is making us think,

& thinking takes us far beyond just flipping the thing around
to have contempt for the Pharisee.

The answer isn't making the heroes villains and villains heroes,
we've lost the plot in this case & created other problems.

Consider this: though Pharisees are generally depicted unfavorably in the Gospels.

there are multiple exceptions, particularly in Luke,
where we've been this past year on Sundays.

Elsewhere in Luke,

Pharisees warn Jesus about plots against him (13:31).

Jesus also accepts the hospitality of Pharisees,
goes to dine with them (14:1).

Gamaliel, who in Luke's sequel urges caution before condemning Jesus' followers,
was a leading Pharisee (Acts 5).

Nicodemus was a Pharisee (John 3).

Maybe the Pharisee isn't such a stock character for Jesus after all

This parable reminds us of our own limited perspective as humans.

We notice things that do not matter.

We ignore things that are critical.

Often not on purpose but because we are just flawed.

What makes it worse is sometimes we are dead on—

Sometimes we get things so right—

Human ingenuity is truly amazing.

As the Collect for Purity says, which is distinctive to the Episcopal Church,

all hearts are open, all desires known, & from whom no secrets are hid

In this case, Jesus sees the goodness in the bad guy

and the badness in the good guy,

Inviting us to reflect ourselves about our assumptions
about other children of God.

Have a little humility, Jesus says.

God sees all and God loves all, in our frailty and weakness,

in our awesomeness and admirability,

in that which seems unremarkable and normal now

and that which we may be judged harshly by in later generations.

Remember Minister Emerson, the minister of the church in Concord

right before the American Revolution, a “Son of Liberty?”

Every day, after working at the church, he would return to The Manse,

a household which ran largely thanks to Cate and Phyliss,

two enslaved people his wife brought into the marriage.

The historians at the Manse have also found letters in which

Ralph Waldo Emerson advocated for sending freed Black folks to Africa—

not back to Africa, mind you, since this would have been

sending folks somewhere they had never been before.

And Sarah Bradford Rippley, the most learned woman in the nineteenth century,

was conspicuously absent from the anti-abolitionist movements in Concord,

A movement led almost exclusively by women in suburbs, not men.

She said she had her hands full.

And if these wonderful people, these residents of the Old Manse,
 If Jesus' disciples, who think they know who is the good guy
 and who is the bad guy as the story starts,
 got it so right sometimes, and so wrong other times,
 I'm betting we do too.

Approaching people with humility is important.

And, you know, honestly, I don't want to tell you that.

I'm not in the mood to try to understand
 the complicated nature of folks right now.

It seems dumb and frankly risky.

And the Gospel is not about what I want it to say,

I just can't get around that today

Jesus is begging us to have a little humility

Towards one another.

In closing, one more person we learned about on this tour at The Old Manse

this extremely thoughtful, very engaging tour entitled

American Contractions: Slavery & the American Revolution

at The Old Manse.

Daniel Bliss. Daniel Bliss is the Loyalist who told the Brits about munitions in Concord,

Bliss is the reason the British army headed towards Bunker Hill in the first place.

Was deemed enough of a traitor that he had to go to England

after the Revolution and never come back here.

What a bad guy.

And also— Bliss also lovingly tended the grave of the only freed black man

buried in Concord's oldest cemetery, a grave routinely & repeatedly vandalized by,

I can only suppose, other residents.

What a good guy.

A little bit of humility can go a long way. Amen.