

Sometimes I hear our gospel readings and I just wish there were relevant to today's world. *Thank you God that I am not like them*, the Pharisee prays. Nothing relevant here.

Thank God that I do not think / act / live / love / look / believe / vote like that person. We all pray that prayer from time to time, perhaps even several times a day. And from this parable, we gather that it might not be the best way to orient our prayer life. But who do we walk away thinking is in the right after hearing this parable? It's the tax collector, isn't it? The one who oppresses others by day, but seems genuine in his humility and his longing for grace.

That would be too easy. And Jesus doesn't speak "easy." To identify ourselves with the tax collector because we too are people who royally mess up on occasion, and to cast the self-righteous Pharisee as in the wrong, would be to fall into the trap of us versus them all over again. We walk away from this parable with our wayward but repentant hearts, saying, "Thank God we are not like that Pharisee."

You see, the Pharisee isn't the bad guy here. But neither is the tax collector. Both are recipients of God's grace. How's that for a paradox? Jesus doesn't buy into the traditional expectations of narrative arcs and typecasting. Jesus is more into turning the world upside down, making us look at our own lives and one another through new eyes.

The funny thing about biblical translation is that translators make a choice of how to translate a given passage. Sometimes they have a difficult decision to make, based on multiple definitions or uses of a certain word. In our gospel today, we heard "This man went down to his home justified rather than the other," and yet "rather than" was taken from a simple Greek preposition that could also be translated "because of" or "alongside." Let's imagine for a second that the tax collector didn't receive grace instead of the Pharisee, but because of the Pharisee, or alongside the Pharisee. That changes things, doesn't it?

The Pharisee isn't a terrible person; in fact, he's more upright than many of us could ever claim to be. So what if we were to think about this parable through Jewish tradition's "merits of the ancestors" or "stored-up protection," the idea that the good deeds of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could be transferred down to us? Within this understanding, even if we sin, we're covered by the copious positive actions of our forefathers and foremothers which have been stored up and passed along to us. Perhaps, then, it was the overabundance of the Pharisee's uprightness that protected others around him. Maybe the Pharisee was a little too self-righteous, but perhaps it was his righteousness that spilled out upon others and benefitted the entire community. Thus, like Jesus, flipping the world on its head.

Lest we swing the pendulum to say, "All hail the Pharisee! Clearly he's the hero of this story after all!" ... let's look again at the tax collector. This man extorts people for a living. He takes advantage of people who are down on their luck and likely collects money dishonestly. He's probably well-connected and rich, but not well-loved. And a tax collector would not often find his way into the Temple, an entity his employer - the government - often exploited. So why does he arrive this day? Is he acknowledging that he does not practice love or mercy in his daily work and that he wants to amend his life to do better? His beating of the breast indicates a broken human standing before God asking for wholeness. He may leave this encounter, full of God's grace, renewed and ready to turn over a new leaf and live his life differently. And yet, he may also go right back to his job the very next day and continue conducting business as he always has, the only way he knows how. Just as we sometimes confess our sins and then turn around and fall into the same patterns all over again.

And yet, this tax collector receives God's grace. Do we need to know how the story ends? Does it matter whether he's a changed person?

To many of us, it really does. Our minds are oriented toward justice. When someone doesn't play by the rules we've put in place or have ourselves agreed to, we want them to be punished.

For example, the self-important driver who passes 50 merging cars on the shoulder just to squeeze in the front of the line? I imagine I'm not alone when I take great pleasure in picturing that driver getting a flat tire. And when we ourselves play by the rules, we often do so not just to avoid punishment but with the expectation of reward.

The positive reinforcement movement has proven highly effective, so much so that as adults, we find ourselves wondering who's going to add the sticker to our chart or give us our well-deserved lollipop. I know of a person who made stickers for just this purpose: adulting awards, things we can give ourselves when we complete a mundane or difficult grown-up task. They're meant as a joke, but who wouldn't appreciate a sticker that acknowledges: I filed my taxes, or I put on pants even though I didn't have to leave the house today, or I returned a difficult phone call, or I folded the laundry that came out of the dryer a week ago! So what happens when we put in the work but someone else gets the recognition instead of us or because of us or even alongside us?

In college, one of my favorite professors was Dr. Kass Fleisher. I took a women's lit class from her and she made it clear from day one that she was not there to coddle us. She assigned challenging literary works, expected us to stay on top of a heavy workload, and taught us how to think critically and ask the difficult questions. Several people dropped after the first class when whining broke out over the strenuousness of the syllabus and students began demanding that she make the course easier. Instead, she responded that people weren't asking the important questions about her background and pedagogy but about whether or not they were going to get A's in the course. To which she concluded, "I don't care whether or not you get an A." Many students left angrily and a few of us sat in terror and awe of her boldness and decided that we really wanted to learn what she had to teach.

As the semester neared its end, Kass introduced an unconventional idea: why don't you all decide your own grades? I had poured my heart into those papers and my thinking had been greatly expanded throughout the semester, but I knew I still had work to do. So was I deserving of an A? Maybe an A minus? We all turned in our grade justification papers and Kass asked whether we might all get A's. I was surprised by my reaction. Instead of feeling thrilled about my own grade, I was irritated that others who had clearly slacked off might also benefit from this liberal thought experiment: the communal A. What would it cost me to go along with it? What might they gain?

Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine introduces the idea that maybe life is like one big group project, the kind you dreaded in middle school, made up of the smart student, the artsy one, and the slacker. Just like my women's lit course, everyone receives the same grade at the end of the group project, whether they were the one who put in 95 or 5% of the work. And we struggle with that, just like we struggle with today's parable, because the idea of unlimited generosity is unfamiliar to us. Jesus helps us see that "divine grace cannot be limited, for to limit this grace would be to limit the divine."¹

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, "The Pharisees" in *Short Stories by Jesus*

What if we could let go of our sense of justice being reward for the good and punishment for the bad? What if we could loosen our grip on scarcity, the fear that there's only enough for a few of us, and when it all runs out, that's it? I'd like to think of God's divine grace as being more along the lines of a classic Oprah moment. There's an episode in which the audience at Harpo Studios has watched eleven people get a brand new dream car, and Oprah reveals that there's a twist: she has one car left. She has assistants hand out a box to every audience member and tells them that one of their boxes contains keys. As they open their boxes and each pull out keys, Oprah begins pointing at each person and shouting, "You get a car! You get a car! You get a car! You get a car! Everybody gets a car!" The surprise and excitement and sheer joy and overwhelming emotion of it is all caught on camera as people jump up and down, hug, and cry. No one is upset that their fellow audience members also got new cars, even though Oprah said there was only one left and - upon seeing that their box contained keys - they thought *they* were the lucky recipient.

What if we could receive God's unlimited grace with such surprise and excitement and sheer joy and overwhelming emotion? You get God's love! You get God's love! You get God's love! You get God's love! Everybody gets God's love!

We of course want to live our lives as the people who do right in the first place and come to God in humility when we do mess up. And yet through the stories in the Bible and our own life experience, we know it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes we find ourselves in unexpected circumstances, following paths we never could have imagined, and we rely on the grace of friends and strangers. Sometimes we find ourselves with an overabundance of goodness we are looking to share.

We live in community, a community full of upright self-righteous Pharisees and misguided regretful tax collectors and a whole lot of us who fall somewhere in between. At any given time, our actions could be helping others, and the actions of others could be helping us. And that's okay, because God is heaping Her grace upon us, in unlimited supply. God so wants to draw us nearer to Her and to one another that She reaches in that bottomless bag again and again, letting it fall upon us like confetti. Let us not begrudge one another but let us rejoice and celebrate *alongside* one another, dancing wildly as that grace confetti rains down.