

Pentecost 20C - October 27, 2019

“Them” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

Again, Luke tells us how to understand the parable we hear today. The parable is

“told to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

Contempt is the corrosive element that decays and destroys relationships. Most often, contempt is a slow burn between people. It slithers and crawls underneath the low branches and dense weeds of our personalities and entwined histories with one another. Contempt relies on little gestures and expressions - the eye-roll, the barely whispered comment that interrupts someone else saying something about another person - sowing discontent and irreparable statements about the person behind their back and in camps formed so you can ‘justify’ yourself when the statement comes back at you. Contempt destroys everything, and if you hold it within you for another, it will eat you from the inside out.

But contempt is also a trap. Did you get caught in the trap of this parable? Once you see it, or rather, once I saw it, I realized how trapped I really was.

One of my favorite books is a book called “Them”, by Jon Ronson. Jon Ronson is a British reporter and writer who makes his living by researching groups and persons who are otherwise held in contempt by proper culture. One of his most recent projects was to spend a few weeks interviewing and researching the pornography industry. Instead of letting other people tell him what to think about “*those people*”, he went and hung out with them and made friends with actors, producers, film crews, and publishers.

In the book, “Them”, Jon goes on tour to find talk with crazy groups of people around the world. He interviews militia leaders in the woods of the Northwest. He interviews black separatists in New York City. He talks with some neo-Nazis somewhere in the Midwest. Jihadists in Afghanistan. For a few years before, he developed a list of ‘deplorables’, as it were, and then got his publishers to send him on a tour of the weird around the world.

The book is a profound humanizing of people we have little tolerance for as a society. America, of course, is the ideal breeding ground for the crazy and wild because it is one of the very few places in the world where thinking and speaking are an essential right of the individual. Coupled with the right of assembly, you can get some pretty bizarre cults and movements real quick.

Jon freely admits that he had to work hard to overcome his own contempt for the ideas and the people who follow those ideas in order to write the book. He also freely admits how much the

journey changed him. Wild and bizarre ideas about the government, for instance, were not nearly as outlandish once a family tells how the local government decided to exclude and manipulate the family into giving up land that had been held for generations; how the local government ran the exclusion up to the state and then the national level. A personal and specific persecution rapidly accelerated into a full-blown conspiracy theory, with FBI trucks in the woods and guns drawn all around. These kinds of stories are everywhere.

Jon Ronson saw his contempt and made a different choice than many of us. He recognized it and chose to meet and learn from the people he held in contempt.

We have phrases that we use with one another that seek to maintain our own righteousness and hold others in contempt. One phrase is “*those people*”. We throw this phrase in when we say,

“If I was able to do it this way, they should be able to as well...” I pulled myself up by my bootstraps; why should I do anything for **them** if I was able to do it myself?

Or how about this phrase, which I have said myself on various occasions:

“What is wrong with those people? Who says or does that?”

Sometimes, we have more subtle phrases. One I have excised from my vocabulary is this:

“There but for the grace of God go I”

when I see something I don’t want any part of.

That last phrase I learned to quit saying once I had a profound understanding while visiting the prison in Stillwater, Minnesota. After listening to the stories of some of the men there, I realized that I, in particular, but probably all of us, are never more than 20 seconds away from doing 15-20 years of hard time. We have no idea how quickly things can go south in any given situation until you hear some of the stories the prisoners in a Level 4 prison tell.

I also notice this phrase in my mind when I am around homeless people. When I was in Portland, Oregon, there were so many homeless people. I avoided eye contact. I rarely made conversation. I walked on by people I knew to be lonely. I even knew that, like doing hard time in prison, the distance between myself or any one of us, and living on the streets was a health crisis, a financial mistake, a few days away.

Was it contempt I felt? I like to think not. But I think the most powerful fuel for self-justifying one’s self and maintaining a proper distance from the disaster of another person’s life is contempt dressed with a strong outer layer of fear.

I mentioned a trap earlier. Have you figured out what it is yet?

The easy answer to this parable is to follow what we think Jesus says, and that is to be humble like the tax collector, and to not be self-righteous like the Pharisee. The move from the tax collector held in contempt to holding the Pharisee in contempt is an easy one if we go with what we think we know.

Look how self-righteous that Pharisee is, we think. But the Pharisee is not lying. He has been set apart by God, according to his Jewish tradition. He is not like other people because he knows, teaches and lives out the laws of Moses in his daily life. Fasting twice a week and giving one's tithe - on the gross, not the net - are the height of external acts of faith and piety. Even the prayer this Pharisee prays comes from a common Rabbinical prayer that was popular all the way into the Middle Ages. The Pharisee even thanks God for the ability to be the way he is.

Furthermore, let us consider the tax collector. Tax collectors were not gentle, compassionate characters in ancient Israel. They were predatory gang leaders who were considered heretics and traitors by their fellow Jews. They essentially robbed people by charging outrageous interest rates to support themselves and the Roman Empire, taking a large cut for themselves. Even after this simple prayer that the tax collector prays, the tax collector makes no indication that he will give up his livelihood for the sake of his faith. Isn't part of forgiveness of sin not sinning anymore? Not so for this tax collector in our story today.

And so it is that the trap is sprung. The easy thing to do is simply shift our contempt. It is especially easy for us as Christians, the inheritors of centuries of anti-Semitic attitudes towards the ground out of which our particular faith was born, to switch our contempt from the tax collector to the Pharisee. It is that switch that we miss, and believe we have understood the parable correctly. I will hold in contempt all this rule-following and self-righteous praying and rigorous attention to an upright life. I am trapped.

But Jesus doesn't say the Pharisee is condemned. Like last week, there are translation problems here¹. Verse 14 says in our translation,

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.

The better translation and more correct would be,

*I tell you, this man went down to his home justified **alongside** the other.*

That makes a difference, doesn't it? I think the new translation also gives a clue to how to exit the trap.

¹ from Matt Skinner in the Working Preacher Podcast for Pentecost 20C. Listened to on 10/24/2019

Justification is the prerogative of God and God alone. God justifies whomsoever God will. If anything, the Pharisee has done a weird inversion. He has placed upon God his own desires for who shall be justified and who shall not, when this is the sole work of God. Why does this have anything whatsoever to do with a tax collector who happens to be nearby? Why do we use our faith commitments to force others to behave the way we do? It is not that the tax collector and what he is doing doesn't matter; it just doesn't matter the way we think he does.

The tax collector likely understands a few things. He understands that what he does for a living is antithetical to anything the Temple stands for, and yet he has come to the Temple to pray. The tax collector understands that he has no justification, that he is wholly and completely a sinner who stands without a plea in front of God. He knows himself to be a sinner with no other recourse than to ask for mercy. And he is likely trapped. Now that he is a tax collector, the only available position for him to provide for himself and his family is to be a tax collector. There is no space for him anymore in the social order of the Pharisee and that world.

Self-justifying behavior, like what we saw with the unjust judge last week, leads to contempt, and contempt leads to the destruction of not only present relationships but the possibility of future ones as well.

Paul understood this when he wrote to the Roman church in Romans 14:

10: So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11: For the Scriptures say, "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will declare allegiance to God." 12: Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. 13: So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.

The other trap in our parable is the trap of labels. Placing people in categories which allow us to then condemn them and their beliefs is an essential element of self-justifying and contemptuous behavior.

Who are "Thems" in your life?
Who are "those people"?

Are they liberals? Conservatives? Russian assets? Communists?
Never Trumpers? Trump supporters? Unbelievers? Other believers?
Immigrants? Globalists? Individualists? Deplorables? East Coasters?

Pharisees? Tax Collectors?

We have so many labels to choose from, especially in this day and age. Not only do we have all kinds of choices of who to relegate to a label and contemptible group, we have many places on the television and online where we can reinforce our contempt and ‘Othering’ of those whom we disagree with, those we can call “Them”.

Rowan Williams, the former Bishop of Canterbury, whenever he meets someone new, asks himself two questions:

1. *What can I learn from this person?*
 - a. *Because every encounter is an opportunity to grow in wisdom and humility, to receive God’s Word through another.*
2. *How can I love this person?*
 - a. *because every encounter is an opportunity to offer Christ’s love, to devote myself to the flourishing of another.*

In Christian love, with those questions, we are led into a relationship with another human being, one who is exalted and justified by God, not by us. Even if we have contempt in our hearts, we must confront that contempt when we know we are about to learn something from this contemptible one. Even if we have self-justified ourselves into a place of superiority, we know we will have to find a way to love this person who is below us. And in doing so, in learning and loving from another, we realize we must humble ourselves - maybe a little, maybe a lot.

Contempt erases the possibility of learning and love. Self-justification means we are always comparing ourselves to others, gauging our success and ability against the performance and status of others.

Like the tax collector, we are trapped. If we continue on the path we are on, we live a life of deep sin and rejection of the life God has ordained for God’s people. If we become like the Pharisee, we become beings of contempt for those who are like us.

These last couple parables are about prayer. How do we pray? Last week we learned that we pray persistently and rely completely on God.

This week, we learn that we have no recourse in claiming what we have done or what we desire is in God’s name. We cannot self-justify. We know we live in a contempt-filled culture and are easily trapped in the web that is woven by politics, news, and social media. The world wants your contempt, and the more you have, the more empowered the forces of contempt are in our lives.

And so, what are we to do?

Pray. And in praying, we understand that the only one who justifies our lives, the only one who puts us right with God, others and ourselves, is...God.

And so we pray the sinners prayer:

O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me - a sinner.

Say it with me and with the tax collector today:

O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me - a sinner. (3 times)

And so, sisters and brothers in Christ, go out and learn from those whom you have labeled. And love those whom you have previously had contempt for. And then pray always, persistently, and ask for God's mercy, always.

Amen.