

I have been hiking a lot with the dog the past few weeks, and although I don't think this is as brilliant a year for fall foliage as some, we've enjoyed some pretty leaves this fall. We hike all year round: in the winter, when bare branches make most of the trees look the same; and in the summer, when the trees look uniformly green, at least at a distance; but in the fall, especially up close, each tree, even individual trees of the same species, are beautifully unique. In fact, one maple that is still completely green might be standing next to another maple that has turned bright yellowy-orange that is standing next to yet another maple that has already lost all its leaves. It makes me think: if it's inaccurate to make broad, sweeping generalizations about a grove of trees, how can we be so quick to do so with people?

Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector has traditionally and accurately been interpreted as a polemic against showy piety and self-righteousness, but it's still not as simple as we might want it to be. Luke is careful to tell us that this is a parable—not a recounting of real events but a story made up to prove a point. The characters in this parable, like many of Jesus' parables, are exaggerated caricatures, not realistic people. This Pharisee claims to fast twice a week and give away a tenth of all his income; it's possible that he does this, but there's nothing in scripture to suggest someone should fast twice a week. And to put things in perspective, the stewardship class some of us are taking right now has taught us that Americans on average give away a little less than .7% of their income—not 7%, but .7—less than 1%; so the Pharisee's tithe is exemplary. One Christian interpretation is that the Pharisee isn't really as good a guy as he thinks he is, that somehow, unbeknownst to him, he's sinning in ways of which he's unaware. But if we take his words at face value, he just may be much more pious and much more generous than most people—hard for us to believe, maybe, but for argument's sake, Jesus is saying that he's a really, really good guy.

The tax collector is at the opposite end of the spectrum. Tax collectors made their living by colluding with the Roman occupiers to extort their fellow Israelites. Unlike other tax collectors whom we run across in the gospels, this tax collector makes no resolution to change his greedy and traitorous behavior. Nothing indicates that he is repentant; he prays a simple prayer acknowledging his sinfulness and asking for mercy. Mercy is what you ask for when you admit you're at fault and you can't make it right. For all we know, he could leave the Temple and go back to collecting taxes again the next day. That Jesus claims he goes home justified is scandalous. Jesus' first audience for this parable—the people who trusted in their own righteousness and regarded others with contempt—are going to be understandably angry at this story of offensive, undeserved grace.

In spite of his frequent fasting and charitable giving, the Pharisee is not portrayed as the good guy in this story. But neither is the tax collector portrayed as good; he self-identifies as a

sinner, and nobody corrects him. Although it's fair to say that Jesus disapproves of the Pharisee's bragging, it's hard to argue that the Pharisee hasn't kept, and in fact, exceeded, the expectations of God's law. But look at the second descriptor of the people to whom Jesus told this story: they weren't only trusting that they were righteous, they were regarding others with contempt. The Pharisee is not content to thank God for making him the kind of person—or, frankly, for landing him in the kind of circumstances that would make it possible for him to be the kind of person—who fasts and gives a tenth of what he has to charity. Those are actually good things, especially when they're done in the right spirit. But that's not his prayer. His prayer is thanking God that he's not like *those other people*: thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors...I imagine if we thought for a minute, we could add lots of categories to that list... Thank you God I'm not like them...even, Thank you God I'm not like this bloviating Pharisee.

The Pharisee's prayer tells us what he thinks about himself—that he is better than whole groups of other people. But his prayer also tells us what he thinks about God—that God sees him as a beloved individual but despises all the same people whom he holds in contempt; that God stands with him over and against those others; that God doesn't just love him—that's not enough, but that God *doesn't* love them. Author Anne Lamott has famously said, *You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.* We're good at making God in our image; problem is, scripture says that's supposed to be the other way around.

The Pharisee wasn't wrong because he fasted or because he tithed; he wasn't even wrong to identify theft, adultery, and extortion as sin—or to give thanks that these were sins which he'd avoided. Where he gets it wrong is when he says *I'm not like other people*. Yes, he is like other people—a child of God, made in God's image, just like every other person who is likewise a child of God, made in God's image. When we separate ourselves from other people, we separate ourselves from God. What we don't do, however, is separate *them* from God, however much we may think so.

I blessedly cancelled my cable subscription last summer so I'm not currently inundated with a constant stream of political ads in this unbearable season of partisan vitriol, but you have to be living under a rock not to have noticed the broad brush with which whole segments of our society are painted these days. That's not to say that there aren't serious issues at stake, or that there aren't ethically good and morally reprehensible ways to handle some of those issues, or that folks shouldn't feel betrayed when their family or friends support policies that are harmful to them. But none of us are one dimensional, and we certainly can't be reduced to our worst and weakest characteristics. And much as I hate to say it, neither can *those* people, even those people I'm most grateful I am not. It's not just that we're all sinners, though we are; it's that we're all created, redeemed, and sustained by the same God. Imagine what this world would look like if we believed—and therefore lived—that truth.