

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector
Luke 18:9-14 (Proper 25, Year C)

When Jesus went fishing for people he used parables as bait. Hidden in the parables we'll always find a hook, something that catches at us and takes us places we weren't planning on going.

So, what is the hook in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector?

The Pharisee is often in the Temple going about God's work. He tithes, gives alms, does good works, studies God's word and prays. In the parable he thanks God that he's not like other people. And then he names those others: thieves, rogues, adulterers - that tax collector over there...and reminds God of 'what a good boy' he's been.

The Tax Collector, on the other hand, is often going about the work of the Romans, a cog in a great political machine that oppresses and abuses his own people. We could liken a tax collector to a bottom feeder in the vast sea of the Roman Empire.

The Emperor made financial demands on the Governors and Kings under him, and they in turn made demands on the regional officials under them, on down the line to the tax collector who was given a certain amount he had to collect and turn in. Anything he collected above that was his salary, so it was a system that inevitably led to corruption and resentment.

We look at this reality and we understand why the Pharisee is satisfied with himself and the Tax Collector isn't, what is more difficult to understand is why the

Tax Collector went home right with God and the Pharisee didn't. The hook here is that Jesus holds up the tax collector as a model for prayer.

The sorrowing Tax Collector brings his empty heart before God and weeps, while the Pharisee hides his empty heart from God and pours out his contempt on others.

In the story of Adam and Eve we're given the template of the human condition. Do you remember what they did after they sinned? They hid. They felt ashamed and hid themselves from God. And when God found them? They went to contempt: Eve blamed the serpent, Adam blamed Eve and, by implication, God for giving him 'that woman'.

Who do you have contempt for? Democrats? Republicans? Single mothers? Gun enthusiasts? Overweight people? Baptists? People of Color? Poor people? Rich people? People who shop at Wal-Mart? (I have a friend who says that when she wants to feel better about herself she goes to Wal-Mart.)

Or maybe you save your contempt for people you really know, like your husband, your wife, your parents, your brother or sister. All men? All women? Or maybe you save all your contempt for yourself.

How do you act out your contempt? Do you have a voice in your head that constantly accuses you of not measuring up? Do you explode with anger or slowly simmer with rage? Are you snide or sarcastic? Do you just sit back and judge, smugly aware of your own superiority? Do you 'oh so sweetly and gently' try to help others see the error of their ways?

As we become aware of our own contempt we can welcome it as a warning sign, a symptom of a deadly spiritual disease that separates us from the love of God.

When I was a kid I had terrible excema, mostly on the inside of my arms and on my fingers. One day my older brother noticed my excema looked really bad, my fingers were so red and swollen I could barely bend them. My mother decided I needed to go to the dermatologist. When we got to the doctor's office we went right in and I'll never forget the doctor tenderly examining my fingers and then turning my hands over. There, on my right wrist was a red streak going up my arm. I had blood poisoning. The doctor told my mother that if the red line reached my heart I would die. I thought, "What are you waiting for? Call an ambulance!" Thankfully, we had caught it in time, and after several days in the hospital and a round of antibiotics, I recovered.

Contempt is an infection that threatens our hearts. The lovely thing about this parable is that Jesus provides us with the antidote in the form of the Tax Collector's example. The antidote to contempt is Godly sorrow. In II Corinthians it says: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow (contempt) brings death."

A good way to find your sorrow when you're feeling contempt is to ask yourself: What am I longing for? I know when I feel contempt for politicians I'm longing for a world where people work together for the common good with mutual respect. Not living in that world makes me feel sad, and frightened, too.

We resist our longings because they bring with them so many feelings – sorrow, fear, disappointment – but as followers of Jesus, we are called to walk the way of sorrows, all the way to the cross. Amen.