

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Proper 25 Year C  
October 23, 2016  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

It is that sideways glance that always gets us in trouble. It is that furtive frown of displeasure that is our downfall. It is that secretive squint that seduces us into the wrong place. It can be the swift look of condemnation of the baby wailing beside us, when, even momentarily, the thought crosses our brains: "Why can't that mother control her child?" It can be the nearly cautious look of disapproval as we pass the disfigured person on the street. It can be our impatience portrayed in the rolling of our eyes that gives our secret away.

At times, we offer this response out of ignorance. I learned a really important lesson when Andrew was young. When he turned one, I took him to Florida to spend a week with his great-grandmother. My cousin and her 5-year old child came to spend the afternoon with us. I was appalled and was certain I displayed that sideways glance at her daughter, who ran around and created chaos continually, who interrupted our conversation nearly non-stop, who demanded attention incessantly, and I swore that "my child would never behave that way." And of course he didn't, until he also was 5, and he behaved exactly as she did, as any typical 5-year-old would, full of energy and excitement about the world around them, wanting to share it all with the people who mattered most in their life.

Sometimes we offer this response, this furtive frown of disapproval, because something is broken within us, and, to separate ourselves from our own brokenness, we feel a need to separate ourselves from the brokenness we see in others.

Oftentimes, we offer this response, the secretive squint at someone else, whether we're in 4<sup>th</sup> grade or seminary, to peek at our classmate's grade written in red on the top of an exam, not to hope they did better than we did, but to hope we did better than they, to reassure ourselves that we are worthy to be there too.

So it is often fear or lack of self-confidence that is behind our intentional desire to put others down in order to bolster our own ego, or to maintain our own elevated sense of worth when, in reality, in God's kingdom, that really isn't necessary.

The Pharisee in our story today was doing everything right. He was the epitome of a faithful Jew. He came into the temple, the holy place of God, to pray, to open his heart, to offer to God all that was right within. He shared his understanding of how to live out his covenant with God by professing his desire to pray, by offering to God all his good works, by sharing with his God his joy in giving one-tenth of all his riches to the mission of God. He was an acclaimed leader in the Jewish faith, who had a respected position in the Temple system. There is much to be admired. Why wouldn't God want God's holy place, the Temple and/or our churches, to be filled with people who do good works, who give sacrificially, who pray regularly, who faithfully live out their covenant with God. After all, these are the people who pay the bills, who make

ministry happen, who shape the life of the parish, who fill the food pantry, who teach the classes, who wash the dishes when the community meals are finished. This is all good and to be commended. And I thank each one of you who do that here at St. Andrew's. We are all richer because of your character and commitment to God and our parish.

The Pharisee was being so faithful, and then with one phrase, "Thank God, I am not like him," he pulled himself out of prayer and into that seductive squint, that pesky peek, to see how he compared to others who were praying. That was his downfall, for, of course, he found himself superior. This is a parable wherein two people go up into the temple to pray, and two people come down from the temple; one is justified by God, and the other is justified by himself, and has left no room for God to do the justifying.

This parable reminds me of the saying we often hear, "There but by the grace of God, go I." There are two problems with this statement, as I see it: first, it implies that God's grace is not with the other person and that contradicts our belief that God is for everyone. Second, it implies a sense of superiority, that our position, by the grace of God, is better than their position, and we quite frankly don't know that nor can assume that.

For that sideways glance, the fleeting moment when we imagine ourselves superior to others, when we can no longer resist the temptation to put other people down in order to feel okay about ourselves, takes us out of relationship with the other and therefore out of relationship with God. And that is what makes that sideways glance unfaithful. This sideways glance is not a Pharisee trait, it is a human trait, and one that pulls us out of the prayerful place with God.

The Pharisee's prayer cannot end well because it begins by denying the fundamental kinship of all people living in the world, all united under, and as a part of God.

Do you remember how you were taught to pray whether around your kitchen table before dinner or in your Sunday school class? Most of us will remember the "correct" posture: close your eyes, bow your head, and fold your hands. There's a lot of wisdom in that practice. When we close our eyes, we shut out distractions. We focus on God. We offer ourselves to the Holy. We are not tempted to peek at others, to assess their piety as being less than our own. It is as though we put on spiritual blinders to see only into the heart of God and our welcomed place within. When we bow our head, we assume a humble position. It's hard sometimes, to be humble before God. We often want to be self-righteous, to believe our worth comes from what we do, from what we have made of ourselves, or of what influence we have over others. That's when we hold our lives so tightly in our hands that we squeeze out the place for God to reside. We have justified our lives by our own actions but we haven't allowed space for God to justify us through God's love. But, when we bow our heads, with our eyes closed shut, somehow, often, our mind and heart and joined together, and we become aligned to the Holy. And I think the gift of folding our hands in prayer is that, when the prayer is over, we need to open our hands, to others, to the world, and the peace we had just experienced in prayer glides out into the glorious, yet broken world God created.

As with all good parables, we may not be able to identify with either the Pharisee, who will continue to behave in a righteous manner far beyond what most people will do, yet not see the error of his way in his sideways glance of superiority, or the currently repentant tax collector, who may continue to do the wrong thing, to live dishonestly, to show no mercy to those he collects tax from, to be in cohort with the Roman system of oppression.

Yet here's the interesting and challenging piece of this, but really any parable: once we judge one character as being better than another other, we are trapped by the parable.

I think the only escape from the endless rattling around in the parable would be to see that God's grace is upon the Pharisee and upon the tax collector and upon each one of us. There is not a finite amount of grace to go around. We do not need to compete for it, by our sideways glances of superiority. We do not need to imagine we are more worthy to receive it than others, however we define the other. It is freely given to all of us who make room within ourselves to accept it.

Perhaps what the Pharisee had yet to learn was that his good works, his faithful living out of the covenant, could be shared, could be offered as something the tax collector could tap into, for the tax collector's salvation and growing in his relationship with God. And what the tax collector may yet have had to learn was that he could extend the same mercy to others for which he hungered from God.

I think one of the greatest gifts we have in our church is the joy in the knowledge that sometimes we carry others and other times they carry us. It is a gift both ways, for the opportunity to lift others when they are down, or distant, or distracted, and to be carried, to allow ourselves to know it's not all up to us. Because when we are each other's keepers, we understand it is God who is carrying us all. If we take more seriously this necessary interrelationship, we might be more inclined to consider others, because our actions, whether for ill or for good, will impact them. And if our good deed aids someone else, which we can imagine the tax collector doing while tapping into the goodness which had been offered before God from their ancestors onward, rather than begrudge him that gift, why not celebrate all who were justified?

Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar, makes the analogy to a present day situation – which I'll summarize here.

Imagine you're in middle school and a part of a group project. The assignment puts together, in classical terms, the smart one, the one who is good at art, the one who is able to provide provisions (snacks, juice, or if adults, some other adult beverage) and the one who both literally and figuratively brings nothing to the table. Three do their fair share, and more, since they cover the fourth's work as well. The project receives an excellent grade. The fourth, who may show up at the meetings with all sincerity but who contributes nothing, benefits from the work of the others. In middle school, or in college, or in seminary, or in a church community, this can

seem unfair. The three who did all the work are justified, they got their "A", but alongside them, because of them, so did the slacker, as he or she is perceived by the three.

Hmmm... so what are you feeling right now, if you are one of the three? Resentment? Anger? Disapproval? A sense of superiority? Well, often our sense of justice is too narrow. Often our sideways glance is our downfall. Often our sense of generosity is too constrained, our sense of self-importance too great. But that fourth person believed in the system; that fourth person, whom, in honesty, is usually dismissed as lazy, as stupid, or as unable to contribute, may well have done what he or she could. He or she may have felt himself unworthy; indeed, the other three may have signaled to them that they were disappointed that they were assigned to the group. But they trusted in the other three; trusted in the system. Had the other three been more generous with them rather than resentful, they would have learned as well. They would have learned about the gift of community, the generosity of God, and that fact that we don't carry that fourth unproductive member of the group. God carries us all.  
Amen.