

Sermon for Sunday, October 27, 2013 (Parish Retreat at ShrineMont) Luke 18:9-14 "Weights and Measures"

When I was a child, my mother and I would go to the butcher store to get meat. There was a very large scale in the shop, and the butcher would put the hunk of ground beef or the chicken on the scale and tell us how much we owed. There was a large label on the back of the scale, bright yellow. It was the certification from the County board of weights and measures that this scale would accurately measure goods.

It sounds a little anachronistic, but we still see similar things – if you got gas on the drive up to ShrineMont on Friday, you might have noticed a sticker on the gas pump certifying that it would accurately measure the volume of gas that was being pumped. We like this sort of certification, because it means that we are being treated fairly by the vendor. Nobody would like to pay for five gallons of gas when they only received four and a half gallons, right? Weights and measures are one way that we guarantee fair trade, and we value that, and not only in making sure we've gotten a full pound of ground beef or the full measure of the gas we paid for. We as human beings seek fairness, equal treatment, and we ensure it in all sorts of ways.

This week we have another parable, hard on the heels of the one we heard last week about the tenacious widow and the unrighteous judge. We came away from that one with the understanding that even though earthly judgments may only go our way when we fight for them, we can rely on God to always give us justice, to vindicate us, in due time, if we are faithful to him. Human judges may not always be fair, because the weights and measures that they use to calculate human justice may not be calibrated precisely, but divine calibration is always precise. We don't need a yellow sticker with the date the county inspector tested the device. God is just, in God's time.

So what do we hear today? Today's parable comes at the problem of justice and righteousness from another angle. We hear of two men praying in the temple. Okay, that's a good start – we like to hear about people praying. But almost immediately, we hear some code words: Pharisee. Tax Collector. If we are Christians in the 21st Century, we immediately think pompous Pharisee=bad, humble tax collector=good. But imagine you are a Jew in the audience listening to Jesus tell this story. You read the code differently. The Pharisees are righteous followers of the law. They are devoted to God and to reforming the temple system. They are the quintessential good people. The Pharisee is praying a prayer that was a part of the normal daily prayers of the chosen people: "Lord, I give thanks that I am following you and am not like the sinful people around me." When you rephrase it that way, it doesn't sound so bad, does it?

In contrast, you know that the tax collector is bad. He is a quisling, a tool of the Roman Empire collecting money from those who cannot afford to give it to deliver it to the powerful oppressor. You would think, "yes, that tax collector should abase himself. He's an unclean, sinful man...the scum of society."

But Jesus turns it upside down. He paints the Pharisee as someone who is busy judging others and then saying he is righteous and others as not. He is portrayed as judgmental and self-righteous in his physical posture and in his prayer. He paints the tax collector as someone who knows that he is not righteous and is in need of God's mercy. He doesn't judge others. He

only judges himself and then he bows down to God and says "have mercy on me, a humble sinner."

It would have been shocking to those listeners when Jesus first told this parable, because Jesus held up the awful person as the paragon, and the paragon as the awful person.

And Jesus did that for a very particular reason. He knew that it is in our nature to judge others and not look quite as closely at ourselves.

It has been a week of people judging and then demanding justice in horrifying ways.

In Sparks, Nevada, an angry middle-schooler went into school with a 9 mm handgun. He shot and killed a math teacher and wounded two students. We do not know whether the boy targeted the teacher and students because of some issue he had with them or whether he was the victim of bullying, but whatever the motive, somehow this child got the idea that he had the right to judge others, and to exact a terrible justice on them. A teacher who survived his tours of duty in the war in Afghanistan was killed, in his home town, in a middle school math classroom. Did this child have the right to judge and act as he did?

In Massachusetts, a 13 year old murdered his math teacher. We do not know his motive at this point, but it would not surprise us to hear that he was angry at her for some reason, and wanted to wrest his own ugly form of justice from her.

What might have lead this two young people to think they had the right to do this? What have we taught our children, that some might act in this way?

Here's a quote from a blog directed at fathers: "Teach your son to throw a solid punch. Our single mommy world is raising a bunch of little wussified boys who get bullied (because they are bulliable). You've heard the rallying cries of "*STOP THE BULLYING! STOP THE BULLYING!*". I say stop raising twinks and the bullying will stop. Each Father must teach his son how to throw a solid punch. Bullies are cowards who pick on the weak, after a jab to the nose you can forget about bullies picking on you ever again." Later on in the same blog post, the writer says "Excessive Apologies are for Wussies. Never, ever apologize unless you have done something terribly wrong. Never end phone calls with "sorry", never pepper your conversation with "sorry" and never BE sorry unless you truly must be. If it wasn't your fault do not say sorry. If it wasn't a heinous crime, don't say sorry." ¹

In other words, we should teach our children to be judge and jury and executioner, to mete out justice in the heat of the moment, and if someone gets hurt or dies...well, they probably deserved it. Can you imagine the boys who committed murder this past week hearing this message and deciding they had the right to do what they did because they didn't want to be twinks or wussies and they were angry about some perceived slight?

And it is not just messages that we send to our children. If this notion of our right to judge ourselves to be in the honorable position and those we are unhappy with to be in the dishonorable one seems alien to us, look at the news. Members of Congress are so stuck in

¹¹ <http://boldanddetermined.com/2012/05/28/52-things-every-father-should-teach-his-son/>

their positions that they allow the country to grind to a halt in their self-righteousness. Neighbors leave a pile of manure on their neighbor's front steps because they think he hasn't kept his lawn trimmed sufficiently. Teenage girls mock another girl on FaceBook because she hasn't followed the acceptable manner of dress or because she dated a guy they were interested in.

What kind of world do we live in when we decide we are the righteous ones, and others deserve punishment or mockery or shunning?

Have we forgotten what Jesus taught us?

Only God has the right to judge. Only God. We have much to be judged upon, and many reasons to say "I am a humble sinner. I've tried, but oftentimes I have failed. I ask your mercy, O Lord."

We have a choice. We can be a Pharisee. Stand up there and proudly say "I'm just fine, thank you very much. I'm so glad I'm not like those other folks, and in fact, I'm just about perfect." Or we can be a tax collector and bow down and ask God to love us in all our imperfections, in all our brokenness, and say "Help me. Forgive me. Have mercy on me. Teach me." And remember that every time we are tempted to think we are right and everyone else is wrong, to judge another, to demand revenge, to exclude.

Jesus' message is a hard one, because we want to be judged as good and we hate to be judged as wrong or bad or evil or weak. But if we trust in God's ultimate loving judgment, we have got to relinquish those judicial robes to the only one who has the right to judge. We have got to bow down and say, "Help me let go of the need to judge, and help me to teach your message to those who still feel that need."

Amen.