

God, I thank you I am not like other people.  
God, I thank you that I am not like her,  
and God, I thank you I am not him!  
He is a womanizer, an adulterer,

**Sunday, October 23**  
**Proper 25**  
**Luke 18:9-14**  
**The Rev Fanny Belanger**

And she is nasty.

An enemy of the people, and isn't he a thief?  
Does he give a tenth of his income?  
For all we know, he does not even return his taxes. (Amen)

Right. In the midst of discussing the future of the nation,  
we had a few "Luke Chapter 18" moments this past week, didn't we?  
A Pharisee standing in the Temple, making excuses for himself before God  
Two candidates standing in front of the camera  
in front of American people (and a bunch of people like me)  
Presenting their hopes and their plans but also sadly  
Trying to justify themselves  
Trying to prove they're good, trying to prove they're right,  
often by trying to prove the other one bad and the other one wrong.

Well, I don't know what you think, but at times, I found it almost painful to watch – it felt like  
Both of them were under attack.

Well, maybe they were.

They were defending themselves because they were accused and judged  
And not only by one another,  
but by a lot of us out there.  
Oh well, you need to look good if you want to be elected, don't you?  
Certainly nobody will support you if they think you're a liar or a cheater, would they?

And so maybe there was another elephant in the room (so to speak)  
because it was not only *him*, and it was not only *her*, being defensive  
Maybe it was also a little Pharisee moment for some of us?

Thank you God I am not like these corrupted politicians  
Thank you God I am just a good Christian watching TV  
Thank you God I pay my taxes, thank you God I am respectful of women, thank you God I am me.

Well, hearing people accusing one another,  
watching other people judging them,  
I confess I had a few Pharisee moments where I could not help thinking  
*Thanks God I am not in their shoes*  
Did you have a little bit of that too?

Yet, but this is here maybe that the comparison with the first verses of our text stops, because  
unlike the Gospel,  
it did not feel like anyone was ready to offer much Redemption to anybody.  
A Pharisee moment, it's something all too common  
People putting down other people to look good and feel good about themselves. It happens everyday.  
But today, thanks God, we don't have only the judgment, today we have  
the rest of the story.

Today, Jesus tells us this outrageous and scandalizing truth: Differently to all human rules and common sense

To be elected by God, you don't necessarily need to look good

To be elected by God, you don't necessarily need to be right

And the thing is: To be elected by God, you can be a thief, you can be an enemy of the nation, you can cheat on your taxes.

*Because with God you are already elected, aren't you?*

With God, you are always already welcome and accepted

And so you don't have to pretend you are not you

you don't have to pretend that you did not do what you did

or that you did what you didn't do.

Who was the worst between the Pharisee and the tax collector?

Well, the pools are divided, I would say.

The Pharisees were known to be hypocrite and judgmental, but you know Tax collectors weren't known to be saints.

They actually stole a lot of money and worst of all, they betrayed their own to collaborate with the Romans.

They were with the enemies of their country.

They weren't good, poor and humble

Actually, they were pretty nasty.

So I don't think there were so much difference between them.

There was not much difference because they were both sinners but also

because it looks like Jesus loved them all: Tax collectors and Pharisees.

You see in the Gospel, we often assume Jesus did not like Pharisees because he challenged them - but so he always talked to them.

*And you don't hang out with the people you hate, do you?*

Jesus found solace and affection with the simple and the poor,

but the Pharisees, he always came back to them when he could have just backed off.

Jesus really tried hard to make them understand something,

Because he wanted them with him in the kingdom.

So it looks like the love of God is not only for

the cheater and the betrayer, but also for the hypocrite and the self-righteous,

All the sinners alike, all people in the same room.

But still the story today tells us there's a difference: one of the two sinners will be justified.

*So what's the difference between the sinners who are justified and those who aren't?*

What's the difference between the tax collector and the Pharisee?

Well, I guess it's not so much about who they are than it is about who they believe God is.

One stands in the Temple like in a court room

Looking the judge straight in the eyes, holding his breath,

making excuses for himself, trying to convince the jury he is not that bad after all.

The other one – he kneels far off and comes to God with no defense, relying only on his mercy.

Yes, the difference in the story  
(in this story and in our stories) is that our Christian lives  
can either be a way to make excuses before our judge,  
or it can be a way to be amazed at God's glory.  
God's glory that is God's beauty, God's goodness, God's mercy  
God's ability to give life and to start it all over again, in spite of all our shortcomings.

Don't get it wrong, the one who is truly afraid and thinks God is terrible is the Pharisee.  
Because when you love and when you trust, as the tax collector,  
you don't make excuses for yourself, do you?  
When you come back home at night, do say to your family  
*Look all the good things I did today*  
Or do you just expect them to welcome you and kiss you?  
And if you hurt them, do you try to cover up, or do you just expect them to forgive you?

Yes, with the ones we love, as with God, we are already elected.  
So you see, it does not matter if when we enter the Temple  
we have nothing to say for our defense  
we have done nothing to brag about  
we can just do the prayer of the tax collector  
*I am incomplete and imperfect, take me as I am.*  
Before God, we are like the other one sinners anyway  
We need mercy and compassion, always.  
And it's okay because this is what love is about.

What the story shows us is that if we try too hard to be good, to stand out of the crowd  
We may end up being worst than the others.  
Pascal said: *Man is neither an angel nor a beast*  
*And whoever wants to be like an angel*  
*becomes like a beast*  
Not because we won't do good deeds – the Pharisee did good deeds,  
But because our self-righteousness will make us run out of compassion  
We will become full of contempt  
And contempt can take many forms.

Okay – I have a very sad story to tell you.  
I have a friend who was doing supply work in a parish a few years ago and in this parish there was  
a man paralyzed from the torso.  
And on that Sunday, he entered the church in his wheelchair as the service was about to start  
and my friend heard someone whispering:  
*Each time I see him, I am so thankful for my life*  
Each time I see him, I am so thankful for my life.  
Well I get the point – yes, we need to be thankful for who we are and  
what we have  
But not matter your flaws or disabilities,  
would not you just hate, that when people look at you they would think:  
*Thank you God that I am me?*  
*At least I am not like her, At least I am not him.*

When we look at someone and we thank God for not being them -  
Whatever the reasons, this is contempt, this is false pity, this false piety  
and what the Gospel tells us today is that

*this is the wrongest thing we can tell ourselves  
this is the worst prayer we can ever do.*

Why?

Because we cannot ignore we are all the same and  
God loves us all the same and  
we're all together in this.

Our sufferings are the sufferings of others, our joys are the joys of others  
Their sins are our sins.

And that maybe especially true for all nations: the flaws of our leaders reveal our own flaws.  
We're all together in this.

Because when we are not the tax collector, we may very well end up being the Pharisee.

We're all together in this: We can take it as a condemnation, but we can also understand it as  
compassion

and compassion is the other name of God's love.

Compassion is what brings us closer to God

Not our judgments and not our justifications

Because God have mercy – always

And we always need mercy.

So where do we go from there?

Should we just remain all sinners and miserable?

Well, we're not yet at the end of the story.

Jesus tells us that what matters is not who we are.

It's who we think God is - and it's also our willingness to let God transform us.

This is the end of the story:

verse 14

*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humbled themselves will be exalted.*

Luke's motto – all over his Gospel.

Also put this way: the last will be the first, and the first will be the last  
understood as: the first and the last

at the table.

The Masters and the slaves, the ones who are being served and the ones who serve.

What makes the difference is that with God's mercy, we become willing to serve and not to be served.

What makes the difference is what we decide to do for others.

Maybe that's the question we can ask ourselves in the coming weeks,  
trying to have a few verse 14 moments.

Are we looking for flawless people who don't exist

or are we looking for people who want to serve the people and the country  
and maybe even the rest of this world?

How can we find these servants among us

if we don't become servants, if we don't become them, if we don't become like them? Amen.