

I think it's very tempting to get this parable we just heard exactly wrong. Here's the wrong way to respond to it: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people, especially this insufferable Pharisee. I might not fast, I might not pray very much, and I don't give away much of my money, but at least I feel bad about it, just like that tax collector you spoke so approvingly of. So, yay me."

Uh-oh. Here's a pro tip when you're wrestling with scripture: "Yay me" is a helpful warning sign that you're just about to go off the cliff. "Yay me" is not the conclusion that Jesus was hoping his followers would reach.

As always, Jesus is trying to show them something about the nature of God. This time, he gives them two stock characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector.

Now, compared to those folks listening to Jesus 2000 years ago, we've got the spoiler alert - we know that the Pharisees were a sect that ultimately got it wrong. But to the Jews of that time, a Pharisee was a very good guy, a upright person who was strictly observant of God's revealed law..

So that good Pharisee stands before God, and offers an incredibly self-satisfied prayer. Essentially, he says, thank you God that I'm so awesome, and so much more awesome than this disgusting tax collector. I really like me, and I know you do too."

This is a pretty unappealing prayer by any measure. It's hard to warm up to such smugness. But here's the thing: the Pharisee had a point. He actually was doing most of what God asked.

He read the Scriptures, he fasts twice a week. He TITHES. Whoa. Do any of you strictly tithe? That is so hard core, so faithful, putting your money right where your faith is. When I'm tempted to get all judgy about the Pharisee, I think about that.

And that tax collector ? We know how well tax collectors were regarded because there are several places in the New Testament where we hear the phrase "sinners and tax collectors" as if tax collectors were sinning on a whole new level. There was a reason that everybody hated tax collectors. Not just the same reason that people get nervous around IRS agents, who may make us uneasy but are generally operating in the public interest. No, tax collectors were both collaborators and thieves. They were authorized by the hated Roman occupiers not only to collect crippling taxes, but given permission to extort as much money as they could from their fellow citizens, so long as they gave enough of it to Rome to satisfy their tax demands.

So while we may feel all supportive of the tax collector as he sits there beating his breast, his self-accusation had a point too: he actually was a villain. He'd sold out his own people.

So who is the good guy here?

There's always one character unnamed in every parable, and that is the listener. Parables are supposed to make us think, and this one demands we think very carefully.

If we're not supposed to emulate the Pharisee, but we're also not supposed to get all self congratulatory on being like the tax collector, just what are we supposed to do?

I suggest a different way of looking at this. It's not about choosing the good guy and the bad guy. With God it never is: we're all good and beloved, we're all bad and fallible. The Pharisee's problem was not that he wasn't pretty good. He was. His problem was that he did not recognize the limitations to his goodness, and specifically, did not recognize his need for God. So he took credit for himself, rejected his real need for God, and did not look very hard beyond that.

The tax collector's virtue was not that he was much good as a person. Honestly, he wasn't. But what the tax collector did have going for him, was clear vision. At least at this one moment, he recognized his failings, and most of all, his need for divine mercy. Where the Pharisee could see nothing but himself, the tax collector could see God – or at least the hole where he wanted God to come in.

So what about you? I'm going to guess you are not as pious as the Pharisee, or as treacherous as the tax collector. And you're probably not as smug as the pharisee, and or as contrite as the tax collector. Neither of those stick figures is actually a model that describes you, or me. So the question remains, What is Jesus hoping we will learn from this strange story which it's so easy to get wrong?

Here's a guess, and it's only a guess – parables are roomy and can hold more than one interpretation. But I hear Jesus warning us away from closed satisfaction with ourselves as we are. If we are not looking for God, if we are not listening for God's call to us, if we are not seeking God's movement in our lives, then however great we are, we are estranged from God.

And I hear Jesus saying that no matter how failed or fallen or limited we are, if we look for God, if we are open to the possibility that God is calling us to a new thing, if we recognize that God is powerful enough to work even with, say, me, me with all my own smugness, my tedious need for approval, my black little grudges that I have so much trouble letting go of, if he can work with this whole messy package, if he can work with all your messy packages too, then there is all the hope in the world.

So I hear this parable as putting a challenge to us. Are we going to sit still, satisfied with who we are and where we are, not looking for or listening for God's movement in our lives? If we do that, I think we have turned ourselves into the Pharisee of the parable.

Or are we going to recognize that God is not done with us yet, that wherever we are in our lives, whatever our circumstances, God is moving in our lives, in need of us and our gifts? If we can do that, scary as it is, then we may find ourselves in surprising company, doing things we didn't expect.

I think I have the best job in the world because I spend my days with people getting surprised, over and over, by what God is calling them to do. I have a ministry called Wayfinders, which helps people listen for where God is calling them next, and then gets them support to get out there and answer that call.

I'm here to tell you, it is remarkable, what happens when people take a deep breath, show up and really listen for the voice of God.

Some, who are running around crabby and exhausted, are surprised to hear that God may actually be granting them permission to rest, that God is calling them to take Sabbath. And if Sabbath for them looks like climbing a mountain in the autumn air, or messing around in boats, well, that's just the way God made them, just like he made someone else for whom rest is a long rich silence by a fire with a cup of cocoa.

Others are surprised to find that, as unworthy as they feel, God is calling them, yes little old them, to a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. We actually use that term in Wayfinders - a BHAG. It might be a book that needs to be written. A relationship that needs to be healed. A fight that needs to be fought. A crazy, beautiful dream that begs to come to life - like the teenager I worked with who started a Kindness Day in Bath, where for six years now our whole town comes together once a year and just does kind deeds for each other.

Some people are even surprised to learn that a shattering experience, one that has wounded them so profoundly that they are not likely to recover in this world, can be redeemed, can even be, miraculously, a source of faith for them when they use that hard-earned wisdom to help other people.

You know what I personally am surprised by, team after team? How down-to-earth stepping out in faith looks. It is rarely about burning bushes - it is mostly about baby steps. Baby steps are God's idea, after all. The mustard seed, that is all it takes.

I love that our God is a god of mustard seeds and humble tax collectors and the good news that we are never too old for an adventure, even one that happens one baby step at a time.

God, please help us, like the tax collector, to see the crack in ourselves, where you are ready to break in. God, please give us the hope and the courage to recognize that as long as we breathe, You are not done with us yet.

Amen

