

Luke 18: 9-14
Creekside COB
October 28, 2007

“Surprise, Surprise!”

Jesus said, “I have come to gather all good people to myself and bless them for their goodness. God has called me to seek the saved, and let the lost continue in their lostness. I have come to call the chosen unto myself so they will delight in their chosenness.”

You know, don't you, that Jesus didn't say that? But, it doesn't keep us from wishing he had. Growing up I was given a black and white picture of who was good and who wasn't. I got glimpses of what unrighteous folks did when the trains on Main Street caught us. There were several establishments on both sides of the street with signs that said, “Bar and Grill” which I thought read, “Bar and Girl.” They had names like Weller's Wonder Bar, Portifino's, The Spot, and the Bank-O-Bar. The names didn't matter to my grandmother. To her, they were *beer joints*. Waiting on trains on summer nights, with the windows rolled down and I heard the juke box music and the laughter of naughty men and women coming from those dark, seedy places filled with the blue air of cigarette smoke.

Saint Mary's Catholic Church was strategically located one block north of the bars. The priests probably had a brisk business during Friday and Saturday confessionals.

Hearing about bar people made me glad that I belonged to a good family. I was clear about what it meant to be good. It meant going to church, believing in Jesus, getting good grades, being on your teacher's good side, not getting into fights, eating what was on your plate, being Cub Scout, not using cuss words, and keeping away from people who went to the Bank-O-Bar.

If only it were that easy. If all it took were abiding by the rules then the issue would have been settled when Moses came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. Jesus told a parable to *some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt*. Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee—righteous, respectable, an all around good guy. He strolled into the Temple, and stood up front, apart from the other worshipers.

The other fellow was a tax collector. He was a Jew working for the Roman Empire. In the people's eyes he was a traitor and a crook. Every year the Romans determined the tax that was owed, and it was up to the tax collectors to get it by whatever means necessary. All surplus money was skimmed off the top for himself. He slipped into the Temple and sat in the back, far away from the altar.

The Pharisee was respectable. The tax collector was reprehensible. When it came time to pray, the Pharisee turned his prayer into a Twentieth Century Fox production. With arms outstretched he gazed up to heaven and prayed, "God, thank you that I am not like other people. You know who I mean—the thieves, rogues, cheats, gamblers, pornographers, adulterers, and that tax collector sitting back there. As you know, I fast, I tithe a tenth of my income, I sing in the Temple choir and I've eliminated red meat from my diet.

The tax collector had no clue of how to pray. He couldn't look the sky in the eye. He could only look down at his shoes, beat himself in the chest and cry out, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Some of you remember a song your children learned to sing on Sesame Street called, "One of These Things is Not Like the Other." It goes like this:

One of these things is not like the others,
One of these things just doesn't belong,
Can you tell which thing is not like the others
By the time I finish my song?

Jesus asked, “Which one is not like the other? Which prayer was answered? The men had no names, but by their fruits, the people knew-- a respected, God-fearing Pharisee and a bean counter that sold his Jewish soul to the Romans. “Which one went home justified?” Jesus asked. “That’s a no-brainer,” they said. “The Pharisee!” “Surprise, surprise,” Jesus replied. “Not the Pharisee.”

An insightful man named Ambrose Bierce defined Christianity as “a religion admirably suited to the needs of one’s neighbor.” When it comes to self-assessment, we are usually generous with ourselves. Sure, we wouldn’t think of comparing ourselves with Mother Theresa or Billy Graham. But is there anyone here who hasn’t thought themselves better than others? I knew that the Bibbee family was further along the justification curve than the patrons at Weller’s Wonder Bar.

Will someone be honest enough to admit to thinking the world be a better place if there were more people were like you? Don’t be timid. After all, you are good people. You abide by the rules of decency. You will help someone in a pinch. People like you are the backbone of a quality community. It couldn’t hurt having more people like you spread throughout our troubled world.

As long as we’re being honest let’s also admit that we have more in common with the Pharisee than the low-life tax collector. Yes, the Pharisee has an inflated ego, but there’s no argument about which one has more has a more positive contribution to the community. But the moment we count ourselves better than others is the moment we fail to honestly look at ourselves and fail to understand God.

The Pharisee’s trap is an easy one to slip into. It’s like the old Sunday school teacher who said to her children’s class, “*Aren’t we glad we’re not like that Pharisee?*” Jesus is not telling us to be like one or the other. Robert Capon says that both the Pharisee and the tax collector are dead ducks. “The Pharisee is

a very high class kind of dead duck, but they are both dead as far as being able to reconcile with God is concerned.”

If the world is going to stand a chance it will take more than nice, considerate people to pull it off. Jesus didn't tell this parable to teach us how to act. Some of his parables did. Last Sunday we looked at the widow who was relentless in seeking justice from a judge. If we could learn to pray like the widow and not lose heart we would really have something. But as Will Willimon says, most of Jesus' parables are designed to teach us about the large, unpredictable, unexpected, uncontrollable, and sometimes troubling ways that God acts. A good guy and a bad guy come before God. After both have said their piece, the taxman goes home justified (and he doesn't know it). The good man goes home with his hands empty (and he doesn't know it).

We do not dictate the terms of our relationship with God. There are Sundays you aren't sure we should show up for church. You've got a line filled with dirty laundry. You can't look anyone in the eye for fear they will know your secret, or their righteousness will make you feel like even a lower life form.

Most of us, however, don't fidget in our Sunday seats feeling like we don't belong. We feel good about ourselves. We sing like Frank Sinatra-- *“Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention.”* We pull out the calculator out of our pocket and count our blessings and virtues. We leave worship pretty much the way we came in, thinking we are justified. There isn't much God can do for us because we've got things under control.

If I hear this parable correctly, Jesus says we do not dictate the terms of our relationship with God. Neither man could reconcile himself. One couldn't do it with his goodness. The other couldn't do it by saying what a miserable person he was.

I got a call from a funeral director asking if I would do a funeral for a family that didn't have a pastor. He said it would be a small funeral, so I agreed. Then he said, “There's something you need to know. The daughter of the deceased will be there with her boyfriend.” “Is that a problem?” I asked. *“It's a potential*

problem. Her boyfriend is the largest drug dealer in Northern Indiana. Drug Enforcement agents may try to apprehend him.” “During the funeral?” I asked. “We weren’t told,” was the answer.

I thought to myself, “This is one I’ll be telling when I’m in the old folks home.” Before the start of the service I was introduced to the family. The director pulled me aside and identified the boyfriend. His attire put mine to shame. He wore a finely tailored pinstriped suit, a silk tie, and immaculately trimmed hair and goatee. I tried to imagine the kind of person could do such a thing for a living, and what he had done to get where he was, and whether he had a conscience, and what I was going to do if bullets started flying.

I had all kinds of preconceptions about the man and the family gathered before the casket. “*Thank God I don’t know what its like,*” I thought to myself. After the benediction the family filed past the casket. The dealer walked over to me and clasped my hand in both of his. His eyes were filled with tears. He thanked me and said he was deeply touched by the service.

Two men went to the temple to pray. One, a Church of the Brethren pastor, a respectable fellow with a clean record. The other was a drug-dealer with a rap sheet as long as his leg. One of them went home justified.