

Proper 25 Year C
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Saint James, Wheat Ridge

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In order to get myself good and scared
In preparation for Halloween,
This weekend I went prowling around the Internet
For the creepiest stories I could find.

I struck gold when I found the website called creepypasta.
It is a terrifying collection of urban legends,
frightening threads from reddit and Buzzfeed,
And an archive of the truly appalling.

There's everything from "Slender Man,"
A long-limbed, faceless man who is linked to missing children,
To the "black-eyed children,"
Spooky kids who stare menacingly at adults
And try to get invited into cars and homes
So they can commit acts of mass murder.

Now, I know these stories aren't true.
They're just stories.
But they're so shocking!
The twists are so unexpected and unwelcome.
I know these stories will stay with me
Until some night I'm going to find myself
Seated with friends around a campfire,
And the opportunity will present itself
To scare the dickens out of everybody
With a good ghost story.

Everybody loves a good story,
And everybody loves a good story-teller.
And when it comes to telling a good story,
Nobody is better than Jesus.
Our Lord knew how to spin a yarn
That was every bit as shocking in its day

As creepypasta is today.

Take the gospel lesson we just heard.
It's one of Jesus's classics.
Two men go up to the Temple to pray.
One was a Pharisee.
Now today, when we hear the term "Pharisee,"
We are predisposed to judge fairly harshly.
We think the Pharisees are the bad guys,
Because that's what we've been conditioned to think.

But when Jesus first told this story,
That's not at all what people would have thought.
Pharisees were the leaders of their community.
They were exceptionally committed to their faith.
They led exemplary lives,
And they sacrificed much in order to
Hold their community together
In the face of the Roman occupation.

Think of the most devoted Christians that you know,
The ones who are always helping out at church,
The ones who give generously to help the poor,
The ones who model Christian virtues.
They would have been Pharisees in Jesus' day.
They were the backbone of the community.

The tax collector is another matter.
Again, we have been conditioned
To think of Biblical tax collectors
As good ol' boys,
Maybe a little sketchy but basically decent,
Because we know Jesus hung out with them.

We think of Zaccheus the tax collector
Who "climbed up in the tree, for his Lord he wanted to see."
Matthew, the gospel writer,
Is said to have been a tax collector.
We think of tax collectors as something like
Our modern-day IRS agents,

Civil servants just doing their jobs,
And a vital job at that.

But the truth about the other man in Jesus's story
Who went to the Temple to pray that day
Is that he has struck a deal with the devil.
On top of the heavy poll taxes and land taxes
Already levied by Rome,
There are a bunch of other indirect taxes
That Rome insists the people of occupied Palestine must pay.
Taxes on nearly everything they buy,
Tolls on nearly everything they do.
Today we'd call it being nickled and dimed to death.

And this man has volunteered for the job
Of collecting these burdensome, oppressive taxes.
He takes money from his own oppressed people
To give to the enemy that is crushing them.

And not only that, he takes extra
To line his own pockets.
He is both a traitor and an extortionist.
He does nothing to help his people.
He is certainly not the kind of person
You or I would aspire to be.

So, you see, if we had been among Jesus's original audience
When he told this story,
The opening line would have been quite jarring.
If he were telling the story to us today
He might have begun,
"Two people went into Saint James to pray,
one was a member of the Altar Guild,
and the other was a human trafficker."

So these two very different people go into the Temple.
And we are allowed to listen in
As both offer their prayers to God.
The first, the Altar Guild member,
Offers up a prayer of thanks.

Jesus shows us this person in the very act of giving God the glory.
Is that so bad?
What's so wrong with thanking God
For having been spared an ungodly life
And for the privilege of living in obedience
To God's commands?

Still, there's a discordant note there.
Having thanked God that he's not like
Several broad classes of sinful people,
thieves and rogues and adulterers,
Then he gets more specific.
He sharpens his focus to the other individual there,
The tax collector.

In your mind's eye, you can see him
Giving the side eye to the other guy, can't you?
It's like he suddenly stops praying
And starts peeking.

But the tax collector isn't peeking or looking around.
No, he's looking down,
Not up, which would have been the typical posture of prayer
For a 1st century Jew.

He was standing a ways off,
looking down and he was beating his breast.
That's something we don't do much these days.
In Jesus's day it was something
Most commonly done by women.
It's an act of extreme grief.

Notice, too, that while the Pharisee is "praying,"
The tax collector is simply "saying."
Even the act of prayer itself seems lost to him.
Over and over again, he just begs for mercy for himself.
It's all about him.

There's not a word of repentance in his prayer.
Unlike Zaccheus, he doesn't commit himself

To mending his ways and repaying what he's stolen.
 He acknowledges he's a sinner.
 But once he's wiped his eyes and blown his nose and gone home,
 He's not gonna be quitting his job.
 He can't.
 It's a nasty business, but he's stuck in it.
 So tomorrow, he'll take the money again from his neighbors,
 Hand it over to the Romans, and keep some for himself.

So it's stunning when Jesus declares
 That it's the tax collector who goes home justified,
 Rather than the Pharisee.

This is a really messy story.
 We want to make it neater than it is.
 We kind of want it to mean
 That God rejects the proud
 And forgives and justifies the penitent.
 But both characters in this story are ambiguous.
 The Pharisee is a good person. Why would God reject him?
 And the tax collector's penitence is incomplete.
 Should we really say
 That God justifies people or not
 Depending on what words and feelings they pray?
 This is surely not meant to be an invitation
 To keep ourselves in a never-ending state
 Of breast-beating penitence, is it?

At the very center of the parable is God
 Who justifies this one badly flawed person,
 But chooses not to justify this other flawed person.

A good person disparages a bad person,
 And a bad person makes a poor penance.
 I think the story invites us to see ourselves in both.
 Like the tax collector,
 We don't always do a very good job
 Of acknowledging our sins
 And then honestly trying to make things right.

And like the Pharisee,
We're sometimes quick to justify ourselves,
And slow to trust God's willingness
To offer grace to even the worst folks.

Now here is the true gift of this parable:
Its setting is more or less the same setting
In which we gathered here find ourselves today.
We have all come to the Temple to pray today.
In the course of our liturgy,
All of us will express our thanks to God, like the Pharisee.
And we will all offer confession, like the tax collector.
And as in the parable,
These words of thanks and words of confession
Will be offered by flawed people
In flawed ways.

But as in the parable,
God is here,
Judging and blessing.

And here in the presence of God, we can feel secure
because we believe that God is ever loving, ever forgiving,
always ready to restore us.
And we are right.

God approves of the wretched human trafficker
over the Righteous Altar Guild member
because the human trafficker admits his faults.
We show our own penitence
not just by making our confession together,
but by our willingness to forgive
and love those who are in need.

Without God's love,
our love isn't up to that task.
With God's love,
we can love even those who repel us.
With God's love,
We can love even those parts of ourselves that repel us.

With God's love,
We may be shocked
by what we find ourselves able to do.

God is the author of the story of our life,
And those unexpected twists keep happening
Because we are in the hands of a master story teller.
Amen.