

Problem: We like to put each other into categories. That can be a problem when you find God on the other side.

-In college I had a friendly debate with my friend, Emily, about pizza. She was CRAZY for what she called the best type of pizza in the world: New York style. New York style, she said, had exactly the right balance of ingredients, especially with the thinner crust that didn't take away from the toppings, to make all of the pizza flavors come together. I, on the other hand, could not understand how she could love this usually overcooked, too greasy, mess of a pizza. Chicago style deep-dish is where it is at. Lots of layers of cheese that accentuate a perfectly browned crust with toppings evenly dispersed. The best part about it is that you eat one piece of Chicago-style deep-dish and you are full.....so you got leftovers which is the best thing humankind has ever invented! We kept having this debate throughout our college years until I remember ordering a pizza from the student cafe on St. Olaf campus called "The Paws" our senior year. Now Paws pizza was cheap, I mean cheap: (\$8 for a large). It was neither New York style or Chicago style, it was just cheap style. Yet, Emily and I as well as a group of friends started gobbling this thing up. We both looked at each other and laughed as our arguments for each style really went down the tubes while consuming this pie! "Well, I guess it's all pizza anyways." As John Stewart, former host of the Daily Show says: "Even *bleeping* crappy pizza tastes good many times, no matter what kind it is.....because it's all pizza anyways!"

-As human beings, we love putting each other into categories and choosing sides. Whether it is be devotees to a certain kind of pizza, a sports team, a band, a career, or a political party, we love drawing the line with each other.

-This is fine until the lines get so deep that we cannot fathom the fact that "it's all pizza anyways." It would be easy to imagine me saying things like "what is wrong with you in liking New York style pizza?" or "Thank God I am not stupid enough nor ever will be stupid enough to like New York style pizza". Now it starts morphing from a friendly argument to me putting one side above the other. "Thank God I am in a group that is on the right (and better) side of this issue. Not like those stupid lowly ones over there."

-As Pastor Eric Fistler says on a sermon podcast about this text: "It becomes very startling and uncomfortable when after you have drawn the line between groups and become comfortable with how much better you are, you discover God on the other side."

Solution: True righteousness is practicing the radical love of God as best as we can.

-Our gospel text today has been traditionally interpreted as the tax collector having "true humility" and the Pharisee "true arrogance". Classical pastors and theologians have used this parable to justify radically humbling ourselves, to see ourselves as the lowly

and sinful ones. We are made right with God, this thinking goes, when we recognize our total depravity and rely solely on God's mercy.

-You can probably tell I disagree with this interpretation for many reasons. The first one being that it totally disregards the Pharisee's first words to God which are: "I thank you God." So if this man were so full of himself, why would he be thanking God? I don't get that.

-The second reason this classical interpretation I believe is wrong is because it understands sin as this disease-like infestation. It goes back to this "original sin" idea of if we can just beat ourselves into submission, if we can proclaim ourselves worthless dirt and that we are evil, then we are "made right". As we are learning in our Adult Education lectures on Martin Luther, this is not how Luther understood sin nor I believe is it how we should either. Sin is not about the broken actions that we do or the evil that infests all of us as this classical understanding suggests, but instead is all about broken relationship. The sin here is the Pharisee breaking the relationship between himself and the tax collector not by his actions but by seeing himself in another group.

-The challenge of this text, the way I see it, is the radical love of God, not us being lowly and humble. God's love is radically equal. God's love sees all of us and, yes, all of creation as connected, equal parts. God's radical love sees all of us as good. The problem lies in the fact that we don't see ourselves this way.

-Let me say it this way: When Jesus said the famous line in another section of the Gospel of Luke: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first", he still means ALL of us get in. It's not like some ride at Disneyland where the first who are last wait in line only for the ride to close at the end of the day. ALL of us get into God's love at the end of the day.

-So, the real problem for me with the classical interpretation of this text is that it actually reinforces the sin of broken relationship which goes against God's radical equal love. Traditionally when we read verse 14: "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted," we think the tax collector has been elevated *higher* than the Pharisee. Instead, I believe Jesus is restoring the equality in this text by saying: "it's crazy to think of yourself in a higher group than another because God does not think of you or love you in this way."

-But, we don't have radical and equal love for each other. Instead, we draw the line and separate ourselves from "those people". Because of this we have major societal problems like sexism, racism, in equal education and income levels, as well as depression and isolation.

-God's radical equal love, the love of Jesus Christ, is **DESPERATELY** needed in our world.

Implication: How can we see radical love working after this election?

-We need to keep this text in mind as we enter the final phase of this election, because lines are being drawn everywhere you look.

-This particular parable, I believe, compels me to speak to a couple things regarding language used in this campaign. We have heard statements calling Mexicans rapists, Muslims should be banned from our country, people with disabilities are stupid, and women are objects that can be used at will.

-This is horrifying, disgraceful, and absolutely sinful. These words fly in the face of every major teaching of the Christian tradition and of almost every other religious practice around the world. I am appalled at anyone who tries to use the teachings of Jesus Christ to defend these evil statements.

-Because I can think of nothing that more clearly denigrates one group from another so forcefully and blatantly like these statements. In response to these statements, it's easy even for the church to put the speaker of these words in the Pharisee's shoes: it's their fault! I can say that this is true for myself out of my disgust. But it goes much deeper than that.

-The message of this parable, I believe, in light of these statements challenges us not to assume the role of the Pharisee ourselves. Let me read verse 11 again: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: Mexicans, Muslims, Immigrants, the disabled, or even like this woman." It's easy for us to blame the speaker of these statements while using them to justify our own defining of groups. That's what makes these quotes dangerous and it needs to stop.

-When Abby and I went on our honeymoon, we went to Mostar, Bosnia. This was a city that was ripped apart by the Bosnian Civil War back in the 1990's and continues to struggle with group making. We got a tour from a young man who was almost exactly our same age and he was telling stories of how he and friends dodged mortar rounds and the brutal reality of knowing someone who was killed by the war. After a good 3 or 4 hours, he dropped us back off at our Bed and Breakfast. I remember saying a comment of how we are both the same age and yet have had different childhoods. He looked at me and responded: "But you listened to me and I want to listen to you." At that moment I remember feeling a connection with him, a stranger, that lasts to this day.

-It's all pizza anyways right? May we have the courage to live out the radical love of Jesus Christ that transcends any group boundary we put in place. Amen.