

East Hartford
30 Ord Time 10/27/13

Alice O'Donovan
Sirach 35:12-17, Psa 65, Lk 18:9-14

When?

Friends, I am curious - how many among us like to garden, and maybe even have a few plants growing in our homes? Did you ever notice that plant leaves will actually turn to so that they can stay in the sunlight? Do you ever turn your houseplants around so they grow evenly.

Good questions are like sun to a plant. Questions, especially good questions have the power to lead, to guide, to shape all kinds of human organizations. Just as a plant will move to follow the sunlight, people and organizations will seek the light of the questions that we ask, in order to thrive.

And of course, we can use questions to stop learning, growth, or change before it ever begins. An either/or question can stop learning, and growth almost instantly.

Scriptures offer all kinds of chances for questions. This morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus' parable of 2 men praying in the temple is a prime example.

Our first temptation in response to this parable is to ask the "either / or" question. Who is the "good guy" the hero of Jesus' story, the tax collector or the Pharisee? We encounter a similar temptation when we encounter the story of the sheep and the goats. Who are the good folks, the sheep or the goats.

Historically, Pharisees have gotten a bad rap - the very word Pharisee has become virtually synonymous with hypocrite. Goats are considered less desirable than sheep. Just ask Charlie Brown.

Whenever we must choose one over another, as in an election, or a restaurant, or when choosing a new apartment, one does become more desirable to us than another. Life often gives us "choose one" situations. But when we succumb to the temptation

of “or” questions in relation to hearing the word of God in the scriptures, we can too easily ignore the whisperings of the Spirit in the text.

Listen to our story as Eugene Peterson translates the text. *Jesus told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’*

13 “Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’”

14 Jesus commented, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

As Luke tells the story, Jesus himself asked and answered the “or” question as he named the tax collector rather than the pharisee as the good guy, as the virtuous one. *This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God.*

I do believe however, that we do well to ask a different question. I invite us to ask the “When” question. When am I most like the Pharisee? When am I most like the tax collector? “When” invites us to a wider “look-see” at our own behaviors and more importantly at our own motives since motive is the primary driver of behavior.

It is always a good thing to do the right thing.

When we do the right thing for the right reasons; that is a very good thing.

When we do the right thing for all the wrong reasons; the thing itself may still be right, and we may be lying to ourselves or

others.

When am I most like the Pharisee?
When I do something, so that I look good to me,
so that I make a good impression on someone else,
or so I can cherish the illusion that I am better than someone
else.

When am I most like the tax collector? When I am most keenly
aware and honest about my mixed motives for my behavior.

Let me offer an example - I love feeding birds. Yes, I buy
black oil sunflower seed. Yes, I put out suet cakes. Yes, this
summer when bluebirds were busy raising families, I offered them
freeze dried meal worms. Yes, I put out sugar water for
hummingbirds. You get the picture.

Here is where the catch comes. I only put bird feeders where
I can see the birds who come to the feeders. Then come winter, I
put bird feeders even closer where I think I can get good pictures of
the birds who come in to eat. Every bluebird house is in full view
from at least one window in my house. Yes, I wash the windows in
our house, not just because they are dirty, but because I need really
clear, clean glass to get good photographs.

Now it is a good thing to feed birds, at least as far as we
know.

But. If I were really generous and purely concerned with the
welfare of the birds, I would put out lots more bird feeders in lots
more places, places deep in the woods, where I can't see them.
My motives are mixed. I love watching the birds, furthermore I
want to watch the birds in relative comfort. Now that October is
almost over, and winter is knocking on our doors, I want to watch
birds from somewhere inside, where it is warm and dry, preferably
in my comfy chair. So much for pure motive and outrageous
generosity.

And yes, I can be tempted to get at least a little preachy with

folks who can easily afford bird seed who live in the midst of perfectly good bird habitat with nary a birdfeeder around. “You really oughtta be helping these little fellows out.”

Now is this all there is to this gospel passage - is it simply a warning about being aware of our constantly mixed motives?? Or is there more to it?

Let’s go back for another look. Listen to the first and last sentences *“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. . . . I tell you, 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.”*

Do you hear these words, “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Is there anyone among us today who does not have need of the grace of God? Was there anyone in Jesus time who was not in need of the grace of God? Was there anyone in Moses’ time not in need of the grace of God? *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*

Let us in this week, remember this parable, and those to whom it was offered in light of that little question “When?”. When am most like those who trusted in themselves? When am I most like the Pharisee? When am I most like the tax collector? Then in the light of the truth given let us turn and place our trust in the love, mercy and compassionate grace of our God who is always as close as our breath, and as distant as the farthest star.