

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Luke 14:1, 7-14 *It's Not Fair, You See*

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*"I don't wanna be a Pharisee. I don't wanna be a Pharisee.
 Because a Pharisee ain't fair, you see. I don't wanna be a Pharisee."*

This verse is part of a Sunday School ditty that pretty much sums up much of what I thought I knew about the Pharisees—a Jewish sect in the time of Jesus, a group of Temple leaders, antagonists of the gospel, the know-it-all hypocrites, the folks who were, according to this morning's gospel lesson, "carefully watching" Jesus, ready to pounce when he said the wrong thing or acted outside the boundaries of their interpretation of Jewish law. The Pharisees try to put Jesus in seemingly no-win situations and they make attempts to strip him of any credibility he is gaining with their followers. Indeed, throughout Luke's gospel, the Pharisees interrogate, denigrate, and seek to humiliate Jesus. They call him out for healing a man and feeding people, just because he does them on the Sabbath. When it comes to dealings with the Pharisees, they've got the deck stacked against Jesus. They abuse their power and status as they corrupt the truth and oppress the vulnerable.

And with these long-held perceptions of Pharisees in my mind, I began studying for this morning's sermon. I was caught completely unawares when I came across a statement in a commentary from a distinguished Biblical scholar whom I trust because she has far more knowledge, expertise, training, and experience than do I when it comes to Biblical scholarship and interpretation. And in that commentary on this scripture for a sermon that I thought was going to be about humility she writes, "At the dinner with the Pharisees and lawyers in Chapter 11, Jesus accuses them of neglecting the justice and love of God (11:42–43). Luke's Jesus has a complex relationship with Pharisees (some [scholars] suggest Jesus may have been a Pharisee himself)."

"No. Wait. That can't be." I said to myself, "Because a Pharisee ain't fair, you see." The song even says so! After my initial shock, I did what any decent preacher passing muster would do . . . I Googled "Was Jesus a Pharisee?" Some of the answers were reassuring in that they supported my long-held views on Pharisees. "No. Jesus was not a Pharisee." "No. The Pharisees were the enemies of Jesus." "No. Just no." But then I delved a bit deeper—past the popular answers from bloggers and folks with no scholarly knowledge that would imply they had a level of expertise to answer the question with any real credibility or authority.

When I took the time to look at more in depth material, lo and behold, I discovered that there are reputable scholarly references—from faithful Christian and Jewish scholars—that support the possibility of Jesus being a Pharisee.¹ Perhaps the most persuasive has to do with Nicodemus, a Pharisee upon whom I have learned to look with sympathy because he does seem to try a bit harder than his cohorts to relate to Jesus. Indeed, even unto the point that, in the third chapter of John's Gospel, Nicodemus calls Jesus "rabbi," the Hebrew word for "teacher." Now, an argument that supports the theory that Jesus was a Pharisee goes like this . . . if Nicodemus was a Pharisee and he is calling Jesus "teacher," it could be argued that implies that Jesus was a Pharisee, a teacher of the Jewish sect of which Nicodemus was a part. Otherwise, Nicodemus would not address Jesus as teacher. And, this morning's scripture does say that Jesus was at the house of a prominent Pharisee for dinner. If all of the Pharisees were his arch enemies, would Jesus have gone to one of their homes for a dinner party? I don't know.

Now this is not intended to be a sermon that supports or denies the proposition that Jesus was a Pharisee. I'm just going to add that to my list of "Questions for Jesus" that I want to ask when I die and leave it at that because the answer to that question doesn't seem to have much impact on our daily efforts to follow in the way of Christ some 2000 years later. But, what does bear pointing out as part of this conversation is that

¹ http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01111997_p-48_en.html, Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1992, Volume 5, pgs. 289-302, <https://jewsforjesus.org/publications/issues/what-religion-was-jesus/>,

Pharisee or not, Jesus was, beyond any reasonable argument, a Jew and therefore there is no room for antisemitism in modern day Christianity. That is an important reminder for us to carry into our week.

And, along with that, it seems this question of whether or not Jesus was a Pharisee invites us to reconsider some of our preconceived notions about how we categorize all kinds of groups of people, the Pharisees are just the illustration that's on the table this morning. For instance, in taking a bit of time to research the Pharisees, I learned, well, if you really want to know all I've learned in the past week about the Pharisees I'll tell you sometime when dozens of other people who maybe aren't so interested don't have to overhear. For our purposes this morning it is enough to say that I learned there are multiple opinions on who the Pharisees were and what they believed, myriad reasonable options as to the role they played in society, and convincing evidence that there was theological diversity among them that renders attempts to generalize them and pigeon-hole them irresponsible and unfair. Indeed, when I went back and reviewed the text of my Theology of the New Testament course in seminary, I was reminded that just as Judas and Peter didn't live up to the ideals of what people thought a disciple of Jesus should do and be, so too were there Pharisees who did not live up to the ideals of what people thought a Pharisee should do and be and to judge the whole on the basis of a part, well, it's not fair, you see. And so it is that, suffice it to say, I refuse to ever sing "because a Pharisee ain't fair, you see" again.

But what is fair to suggest is that, in the end this is, still, a scripture passage about humility. But, with this new expanded appreciation for how the Pharisees may have been misunderstood and demonized, perhaps the modern application of the parable has less to do with being humble at a dinner party and more to do with being humble in how we think and speak about other people, especially when it comes to the broad labeling and criticizing of groups of people, a behavior that has grown popular and seemingly acceptable in today's society.

For instance, I have a friend on Facebook who makes sweeping generalizations about Christians. None of said generalizations paint us in a flattering light. I'm tempted to write to him and tell him that in the last month this church has given nearly \$1000 towards a car for a local mom with disabilities who, because of her limitations, needed a little bit of help getting a car so she can keep her job and get her kids to school safely. In that same letter I would explain that in the same month we purchased diapers, clothes, and medical supplies for another single mom who works over forty hours a week but because of the housing costs up here, is still struggling to get by. I would also explain to him that at last week's car wash there was a young woman who was washing cars on her 16th birthday to raise money to help people in another state stay safer, warmer, and drier through the Appalachia Service Project. Now, my letter to him would also include a confession that I myself, and other Christians I love, sometimes act outside the ideals of our faith. But, I would also defend us explaining that doesn't mean we're all judgmental hypocrites. I would tell him we are just trying, day after day after day, sometimes with success, sometimes with not so much success, to share God's love. And of course there are the outliers, those who commit truly heinous acts against God and others in the name of the Christian faith, but they are the exception, not the rule, and I would ask him to kindly not count me, or us, among them in a general critique of "Christians."

And Jesus said, "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Likely it's fair to say that one way we exalt ourselves is in labeling and generalizing other groups of people in negative ways. And if it's not exalting ourselves, it certainly is lazy and irresponsible. And, it's also a whole lot of what our communities and nation don't need more of right now.

Our world aches with a need for people who are willing to dispense with easy labels and hateful generalizations and instead open ourselves up to the more complex realities of who other people really are. So many people are carrying massive burdens and brokenness and because they feel labeled and ostracized,

demeaned and demoralized, they act out of places of fear because we live in a society that rarely creates safe spaces in which people feel secure being vulnerable enough to share their deepest fears and biggest dreams.

And it is into all of this complex mess and mayhem that Jesus calls us to humble ourselves—to listen more than we speak, to invite people who are different than we are into our lives, to resist the temptation to apply labels that limit our ability to see that all people are beloved children of God, to confess when we are wrong, and to question ourselves when we think that we are right. I guess it's sort of the golden rule in a way—do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Or, say about others only that which you would want to have said about you. Because, doing anything less than that, well, that wouldn't be fair, you see.