

October 27, Ordinary 30C (Luke 18:9-14)

## **Jesus' characters aren't nuanced; they're all elbows and ankles.**

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [October 9, 2019](#) issue

My niece refused to offer a memorized table grace. She insisted that she be allowed to pray extemporaneously for that specific meal. With hands folded, head bowed, and one eye scanning the table, she prayed, “Thank you, God, that Mom mashed potatoes and made gravy. Thank you, God, that there are enough rolls for me to have two. I don’t thank you, God, for the beans. Amen.”

Her prayers were highly contextualized and painfully honest. She was, at the age of five, master of an ancient prayer form and interpreter of a tradition. She was a tiny Pharisee in pigtails.

Jesus has a bur under his saddle about the Pharisees. It’s a shame. They served a vital role in Jewish religious life because they believed the law to be a living, breathing thing. Pharisees held the received (written) law in one hand and the lived (oral) law in the other, interpreting texts in context. Pharisees prayed as did my niece—faithful both to ancient forms and to daily reality.

The divide between Sadducees and Pharisees is the same divide we find in current debates about constitutional interpretation in our country. “Originalists” (i.e., Sadducees) attempt to read and interpret the Constitution through the eyes and intentions of its authors. The Constitution is regarded by originalists as some regard scripture: inerrant, infallible, unaltered.

“Living constitutionalists” (i.e., Pharisees) believe the meaning of the Constitution changes over time, as social attitudes change. The framers could not have dreamed of the legal wars we wage. Living constitutionalists are regarded as interpreters, loving the law as it stands and allowing it to breathe 21st-century air.

That is the preacher’s task, too: remaining faithful to both the text and the context in which it is read. Are we Pharisees, too?

Parables don't allow for nuanced character development. Jesus' characters are all elbows and ankles, sharp edges and hard surfaces. Therefore, even though not all Pharisees were raging hypocrites, nor were all tax collectors repentant sinners, we will leave them, for the moment, in their one-dimensional prisons.

After all, we love a caricature. It is easier to hate the one-dimensional, imagined enemy than to embrace the complicated creature Jesus names "neighbor."

Enter, stage left, the Pharisee in this parable. He settles into a prominent spot in the temple, mirroring the posture of the Pharisees Jesus pillories in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, "the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues on street corners." The Pharisee we meet in temple today is that guy.

Hands folded, head bowed, one eye scanning the room, he prays. *Thank you, God, for my faithful meal practice. Thank you, God, for my charitable attitude. I don't thank you, God, for thieves, rogues, adulterers, and tax collectors, except that I am not one. Amen.* Like my niece, he is probably not a fan of green beans, either.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was never a nuanced or sympathetic character. Tax collectors were regarded as collaborators with the Roman government, traitors to their neighbors. I'm sure there were others in temple that day who held uncharitable thoughts about the tax collector.

But unlike the Pharisee, who assumes the peacock's position in temple, the tax collector cowers in a corner, head bowed in shame, beating his breast as though a professional mourner. Wet with tears, bruised by his own fists, he cannot bring himself to meet heaven's eye. He has nothing for which to be grateful. He is in temple not to glorify himself or God, but to repent. And his repentance is deep, dark, painful—he repents not what he has done but who he is. The tax collector knows, on a cellular level, that regardless of what he does for a living, he is in his bones sinful and unclean.

Jesus could not have created a starker contrast in this parable. The Pharisee asks for nothing but God's appreciative attention. And for what? For his flawless faithfulness, on parade every day. The tax collector begs God for a scrap of mercy. For what? For being flawed in his being, to his core, from his conception.

At parable's close, the Pharisee returns to his wood-paneled office to further interpret the law. The tax collector, who has no choice about his vocation, returns to

the street to bilk his neighbors. Jesus applauds the tax collector, the sinner who knows his need. Jesus declares him “justified”—even though the tax collector will soon go back to his usurious ways and even though he does not have the courage to seek God’s face. God sees him anyway.

The Pharisee is also seen, though it is not God’s eye he wants to catch. His performance in the temple is not prayer but promotion. He doesn’t ask God for anything. He is right with himself. As Jesus says, “He has his reward.”

The characters in this parable are complicated—they perform against type. The “true” Pharisee would have pondered the presence of a tax collector in temple, mulling the relationship between legal prohibitions against usury and God’s mandate to love the neighbor. The “true” tax collector would have been scarce at temple worship, fully occupied mollifying the Roman authorities and dodging his angry neighbors, all to feed his own family.

Instead, Jesus sets the preaching table before us with stark contrasts: hypocritical Pharisee and humble tax collector. Some think more of themselves and less of others than they ought. Some are deemed “justified” by God and others self-identify as “righteous.” Some are humbled and others are exalted.