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Proper 25C
Peace, Seattle
October 24, 2010 epk
Luke 18:9-14

WHICH GOD?

His name was Lars and everything about him—how he looked, what he wore, how he smelled—made him a misfit in that church basement.

Lars was the victim of a hit-and-run accident that left him a different person than he was before.
- The left side of his face, reconstructed, only vaguely resembled the right.
- His left shoulder jutted oddly forward, and his neck was crisscrossed with scars.

We were just beginning a Sunday morning Bible study at the church where I was filling in, when he walked in off the street. I showed him where coffee could be found, and he sat down to join us.

Lars had a curious effect on the rest of the group. They didn't know quite what to make of him. The cadence of the group—so used to each other's voices and stories—seemed to be thrown off by the stranger in their midst.

When the study was over he came upstairs for worship, sitting first in one pew and then another, under the watchful eyes of the ushers. By the time communion rolled around, he was up and gone. I've always wondered if he figured that, whatever it was we were up to, it wasn't meant for him?

Today's gospel is a familiar parable - the Pharisee and the tax collector.
Perhaps, in some ways, it's too familiar.

At first glance, it sounds like Jesus is using his story-telling skills to pick on the Pharisees yet again; painting a portrait of a leader who tracks his own success by pointing to the Lars's of the world and saying THANK GOD I'M NOT LIKE THEM!

His prayer comes across like a quarterly report to headquarters:

> "Things are right on schedule, Lord. Unlike that guy over there, I'm still walking the straight and narrow. Got all my **I's** dotted and **T's** crossed."

And, at first glance the tax collector seems the exact opposite of the Pharisee.
- His faith life is in shambles; his reputation in the community is shot.
- Purity is as far removed from him as summer sunshine on this cold, October day.

Fully aware of his failure he nonetheless comes before God seeking mercy.
He makes no promise that things will be different from now on. Like an addict caught in the web of addiction, he knows that abstinence is beyond him. All he can do is beat his breast and ask for mercy.

Some parables are clear example stories. They urge us to follow the example they show us; to go and do likewise. **But other parables don't urge us to do anything.** They are images, pictures of God; not an example of the way we are to behave, but rather a depiction of the way God behaves.[1]

I think this is one of those parables.

[1] William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vo. 29:4, 2001, p. 16.

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Preacher and teacher William Willimon once began a sermon this way:

"If your marriage is happy,
if you have no addictions,
if your children are obedient and respectful,
if you can say all of the words of the creed by heart,
and have no major problems believing the Bible and all of that,
then you can leave now. This service is not for you."[2]

Too often the Christian faith is presented to the world as if it was intended for the winners, for those who are a success at life and belief. But of course, when you read the Bible, you discover that nothing could be further from the truth.

In the slice of Jeremiah on our menu this morning, an endless drought has wreaked havoc upon the land and no one is beyond its bitter grasp. In the face of growing devastation, the people are forced to confront the sins of their nation with brutal honesty. Admitting their fault, they plead for mercy.

Though our iniquities testify against us, ACT, O LORD, for your name's sake;
Though we have sinned against you....yet you are in the midst of us,
we are called by your name; do not forsake us! [Jer. 14:7-9]

Though healing is, at this stage, beyond their grasp, **still,** if we learn nothing else from this dark passage, we learn that when it comes to dealing with God, honesty is not only welcomed—it's required.

God isn't interested in us presenting ourselves as who we should be, or who we could be if we got our act together. God is interested in who we are.

In their new book, *America's Four Gods: What We Say about God and What That Says about Us*,[3] sociologists Paul Froese and Christopher Bader describe how the 95% of Americans who claim belief in God can be divided into four distinct groups whose core beliefs can be plotted along two axes—

(1) a more // or less judgmental God and
(2) a more // or less engaged God.

The four resulting quadrants describe:

- Those who believe in an Authoritative God (31%);
- those who believe in a Benevolent God (24%);
- those who believe in a Distant God (24%);
- and those who believe in a Critical God (16%).

Froese thinks this schema can be a powerful tool for understanding core differences among the increasingly diverse citizenship of these United States, and is a much more accurate indicator than denominational affiliation of what a person actually believes.

"If I know your image of God," says Froese, "I can tell all kinds of things about you. It's a central part of worldview and it's linked to how you think about the world in general," he says.[4]

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[2] Ibid, p. 18
[3] Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods: What We Say about God and What That Says about Us*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)
[4] See the *Time Magazine* article *Behind America's Different Perceptions of God* by David Van Biema, Oct. 23, 2006: http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1549413,00.html Froese and Bader have also discovered a strong correlation between two of those four types and the two dominant political parties in America—Democrats and Republicans. See their *Huffington Post* article published October 23, 2010: www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-froese/whose-god-blesses-america_b_771837.html

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The cultural divide in our country, according to Froese and Bader, is not a battle between secularists and believers, but a battle among believers who have very different views of God.

In many ways, that's not surprising, in view of the fact that the Bible itself contains so many differing images of God; and in view of the fact that our fundamental experiences of life—communal and individual—are so diverse.

The New Testament's four gospels certainly have different "takes" on the life and ministry of Jesus and the meaning of his death and his resurrection. Even within each gospel's portrait of him there is a diversity of images which makes it hard, at times, to pin Jesus down.

- Is he the apocalyptic prophet whose penetrating gaze leaves us all wanting, or the good shepherd who seeks and saves the lost?
- Is he the triumphant sovereign vanquishing all who oppose God's reign, or the suffering servant whose willing sacrifice makes the world whole?

Today's parable offers up yet another approach. By upending the "IF WE DO WHAT GOD WANTS THEN GOD WILL LOVE US" paradigm, the parable offers a new image of God—not as the demanding deity who's kept at bay as long as we are able to toe the line, but as the merciful Lord who prizes our honesty and trust more than anything else.

The God whose face we see in Jesus has not pitched his tent in any one of the four quadrants of Froese and Bader's sociological model, but is found instead—surprisingly, ironically, incredibly—at the intersection of two other axes—and these made of wood; he is found, that is, at the cross of Christ.

Here at this nexus, we meet the end of all systems of religious accounting; here at the intersection of heaven and earth, sacred and profane, our lives are set free—for we finally grasp what Jesus in this parable was trying to teach us all along: that the faith to which he calls us is a faith for losers and hypocrites; for those who don't have their lives together, for those who are uncertain of their beliefs, for those who can't get by on their own; it is a faith for all of us.

"Those who are well have no need of a physician," Jesus preached.
"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

God isn't interested in us presenting ourselves as who we should be, or who we could be if we got our act together. God meets us at the cross as the divine Mystery who is far beyond our understanding and imagination,[5] who encircles us with a mercy that stretches beyond our sight, and reaches inwardly, too, beyond our fears and secrets, claiming, forgiving, and calling us just as we are.

So, sisters and brothers, if this Sunday service finds you wondering, empty, distant, or needy – rejoice!

- These words,
- these hymns,
- this community,
- this Table, is for you.

Amen.

[5] See Rev. Patrick Howell's article in October 23, 2010 issue of *The Seattle Times*, http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2013204073_howell23m.html