

Ninety-nine Righteous?
First Reading - Psalm 51:1-10
Second Reading - Luke 15:1-10

Perhaps the bad aren't so bad, and the good aren't so good. The late author James Truslow Adams would certainly agree. He famously said — *“There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behooves any of us to find fault with the rest of us.”* Across our land, we tempt fate, stepping closer and closer to the precipice overlooking the spot where where failing and falling democracies shatter, all because of the kind of self-righteous indignation that demonizes and dehumanizes any who deign to disagree.

Whenever we place ourselves on the fat side of the mathematical chevron, we cease to understand the world as Christ sees it. From the estranged husband who lamented that his wife was not his intellectual equal, to the ubiquitous podcasters who loudly and perpetually demean a significant majority of the world's populations, to the cocoon of the cool kids table where everybody is wearing sunglasses because their noses are held too high, to the pretension of the insider, and the brooding hate of the outsider, the line between civilization and barbarism is becoming dangerously thin.

The provocateurs of hate are having a moment, that's for certain. Every news item is coopted to use as a cudgel against the other side. They own the news cycle, manufacturing fear and loathing faster than the conveyer belt at Lucy and Ethel's candy factory. They fail to understand that self-righteousness is no righteousness at all. The death of civility and empathy is tragic and depressing to watch, particularly when you know that when we fail to seek some spark, some remnant of the image of God in our neighbor, we will surely miss the joy and the glory of God's face shining upon us through the eyes and smiles of someone when they discover that they are found, known, and embraced by the Good Shepherd.

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” If you'll indulge this doddering old fool for a moment, I want to take you back to a movie I spoke of a few weeks ago, *Chariots of Fire*. Only this time I refer to a second main character, Harold Abrahams. Again the setting is prior to the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. Young Harold was the privileged son of a Jewish immigrant to England from Polish Lithuania. (*I should mention that the film was based on actual historical characters*). Having graduated from the esteemed

secondary academy of Repton, and after a stint as a junior officer in the British army, Abrahams was enrolled at the venerable Caius College, Cambridge. Abrahams was driven, supremely confident, and athletic, and he set his mind on becoming the fastest man in the world, the honor traditionally bestowed upon the Olympic Champion in the 100 meter dash.

Yet, England was exceedingly class-conscious, and so Abrahams chafed under the authority, snobbery, and religious prejudice of the Masters of Trinity and Caius Colleges, Cambridge — J.J. Thompson, and Hugh Kerr Anderson. If you want to see the epitome of pretense and condescension, watch the portrayal of these characters by the British screen legends, John Gielgud and Lindsey Anderson.

Summoning Abrahams to a meeting to chide him for stooping so low as to hire a coach to guide his training, their voices dripping with condescension, JJ. Thompson inveighed — *“Abrahams, I’m afraid there is a growing suspicion in the bosom of the University that in your enthusiasm to succeed, you have, perhaps, lost sight of [Cambridge’s loftiest traditions] ... hiring a coach ... Ah, well there, Mr. Abrahams, I’m afraid our paths diverge.*

The University believes that the way of the amateur can produce the most gratifying results.

The Master of Caius College chimes in — *“My boy, your approach has been, shall we say, a little too plebeian. You are the elite, and, as such, must be seen to run rather to the manner born.”*

Well, la tee da! Aren't you the bougie gatekeepers of social hierarchy! Those two knuckleheads are the people I imagine when reading of the grumbling scribes and Pharisees in the Gospels. Tolstoy said, *"An arrogant person considers himself perfect. This is the chief harm of arrogance. It interferes with a person's main task in life – becoming a better person"*

Consequently, the thought that took me by surprise, escaping my lips in response to the estranged husband in love with his own genius — *I think a clear sign of ignorance is the claim of intellectual superiority.* I don't think it was what I expected to say, and surely wasn't what he expected to hear. Yet, it bears consideration in a context dripping with conceit. It is one of the oldest of delusions, isn't it? *I don't feel great about myself, so I'll make myself feel better by convincing myself I am better than them.* It is ironic that we speak with reverence about equality, yet spend the majority of our lives

battling our own insecurities by measuring others in the hope that they do not measure up.

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” These guys truly do have a snootful of self-esteem, managing to disparage the Lord and two separate groups whose combined population basically adds up to anyone who doesn’t agree with them or meet their litmus tests.

Have you ever been so disgusted with someone that you cannot bring yourself to say their name? *“This fellow...”* Somehow, mentioning Jesus’ name is beneath their dignity, and thus, *This fellow* is tossed into the vat holding all the other titles reserved for those who have not earned entry into the society of those dignified with a name — *they* and *them*, the heinous four-letter words identifying our nominations for the society of the damned. Here, Jesus is placed in the company of all who fail the litmus test of these self-entitled cardholders of righteousness, which compels me to direct your attention to a verse in our text that, if not unnoticed, very often goes unexamined.

I promise I will get to the poignant narrative of the Lost Sheep. Don't worry, the shepherd still finds it.

“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” I hadn't really thought about it before, but it appears that Jesus is either being sarcastic or is giving us a pop quiz. Can you tell what is just wrong about this sentence? *“I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”*

Do you see it? *“Ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”* ??? **There is no such thing as ninety-nine righteous persons.** Romans 3:23 — *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* Psalm 14:2-3 — *“The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.”* 1 John 4:8 — *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* Romans 5:8 — *“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”*

You know the stories of college jocks being paid for summer jobs that require no work? This would be the easiest of them all. Stuff all the purely righteous people in the history of the world into a VW Beetle. It's easy, that is if Jesus can drive a stick, because Christ would be the only one in the car.

At the core of this text, Jesus is shattering the notion that we are ever in a position to judge our neighbor as less than, as if we are morally superior to anyone. Condescension is antithetical to Jesus Christ and the calling of Christ's church. No one is beneath the concern of Christ, nor should they be to all who follow Christ.

“The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Jesus heard that and decided it was time for a parable — *“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’”*

There is a poignancy here that tugs at our hearts as we imagine the shepherd frantically searching through the brush and climbing down in the ditches, desperately praying that by some miracle he might catch sight of his lost sheep. We may never have seen a sheep up close, but we intrinsically connect this image to the feelings we have for our children. Late one evening this week, I was scrolling through the television channels and paused on a nature program focusing on the big cats of Angola. I could feel that familiar inner pain that rises when we see someone in distress. A leopard had lost one of her cubs, and she was desperately searching for her child, uttering this mournful, sawing cry that they say can be heard up to 2 miles away.

I'll probably never see a leopard outside of a zoo, and I'm okay with that, but in that moment I was hurting for her, and getting some small sense of the pain and desperation I would feel if it was my child that had gone missing.

Now, I majored in business and wasn't any good at it, but I learned enough to know that the shepherd's actions here do not constitute a wise business decision. However, as a husband, a parent, a friend, I know that

there are times when you just drop everything and go. Wisdom will have to wait. You just go. You just want to know someone is safe, someone has been found. You want them to know they are seen, known, and embraced. Relief, joy, and shared celebration erupt upon discovery and reunion.

“And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’”

Have you ever known such joy? Have you felt that immeasurable grace of reunion with someone you were afraid you would never see again? God, Jesus, and the heavenly host possess that depth of feeling for everyone, for all people, for you. There are no litmus tests of worthiness. There is just deep profound yearning for reunion, reconciliation, and the joy of finding ... anyone and everyone.

“And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” ... Well, duh ... of course he does. And if anyone should be grateful for that it should be those trapped by the sin of pretension, the sin of assuming moral superiority, the sin of pride and arrogance.

William Sloane Coffin liked to retell the story of Marc Antoine Muret. In 16th Century Paris, “a desperately ill beggar was taken to the operating table of a group of doctors. In Latin, which they were sure the beggar would not understand, the doctors said, ‘*Faciamus experimentum in anima vile*’ (*Let us experiment on this vile fellow*). The beggar, who was actually an impoverished student, later to become a renowned poet, Marc Antione Muret, replied from the slab upon which they had laid him, ‘*Animam vilem appellas pro qua Christus non dedignatus mori est?*’ (*Will you call vile one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?*).” Coffin adds — “If Christ did not disdain to die for any of us, who are we not to live for all of us?” (*Credo*, William Sloane Coffin)

“*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*” Lord, I sure hope so. Amen.