

**Whose Child?**  
**October 24, 2010**  
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**Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ**

Right or wrong, black or white  
Cross the line you're gonna pay  
In the dawn before the light  
Live and die by the shades of gray<sup>1</sup>

That's the chorus from a song called *Shades of Gray*, which was written by Robert Earl Keen. It is a classic sounding cowboy tune—all open chords with a swagger-in-the-saddle kind of feel. Yet the story it tells is not classic. It is more complicated. Unlike the classic cowboy *movies* I grew up enjoying, it is never clear who the hero is in this song.

The main character, and narrator, engages in a variety of questionable acts. Just to name a few: he gets blind drunk, he steals a cow with some friends. They even sell it illegally. Now, admittedly, they are all teenagers at the time that the song takes place, so it may be a cautionary tale for any younger listeners. But it does leave you wondering who to side with. Back in the old western movies the heroes wore one sort of hat, and the villains wore another. It made everything neat and tidy—clear as can be. You knew who the good guys from the bad guys right away. There is a certain sort of comfort in that clarity. Wouldn't it be terrific if things were that simple and clear in life, too?

In the parable that Jesus tells in this morning's reading, he seems to be providing exactly that sort of clarity in comparing and contrasting the Pharisee and the tax collector. One seems to emerge as the clear good guy, and the other as his nemesis. But is that really what Jesus is saying? And, just as importantly—what is *Luke* intending for us to understand by framing the parable as he does?

There are two kinds of framing I am referring to here. The first frame is the form of the parable itself—how it is introduced and how it concludes. The second is the placement of the parable in relation to the writings around it. We will begin by looking at the frame of the parable itself. It begins like this: “He also told this parable to some who *trusted in themselves that they were righteous* and regarded others with contempt...” That seems pretty clear, right? It seems that Jesus is about to pull a fast one. He is going to stick it someone who is self righteous.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shades of Gray*, by Robert Earl Keen © 1997.

Now, let's skip ahead to the end of the parable: "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." The justified person here is a tax collector, and not the Pharisee who spends his prayer time giving thanks that he is more righteous than others. So, at a glance it seems that Jesus is fulfilling the stated intention of instructing "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt..."<sup>2</sup> Now, this is usually where the reading ends when this passage occurs in the lectionary. But I think a key to more fully understanding it comes in the three verses which follow.

Which brings us to the second sense of frame—the material around the passage. You see, the authors of the Christian scriptures were no slouches. They made deliberate choices about the way they arranged their gospels so that a deeper meaning would emerge the more you heard or read them. Individual stories would provide some meaning on their own, of course—but more meaning emerges from engaging more of the gospel. So let's look at those three verses, Luke 18:15-17: "People were bringing *even infants* to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, *they sternly ordered them not to do it*. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; *for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs*. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God *as a little child* will never enter it."<sup>3</sup>

There is no apparent break in the action from the end of the parable to people bringing children and infants to Jesus. As soon as he concludes, the kids are there. Now it is possible that these events did occur at another time, but their placement immediately following the parable is conspicuous; as is the audience who receives the lesson. Did you catch it? He is not talking to people who trust in their own righteousness anymore. He is not even speaking to the children or those who bring them to him. He is talking to the disciples. The disciples are the ones who are privy to Christ's most complete teachings. And to *them* he emphasizes the importance of receiving the kingdom of God *as a little child* does. Which raises two important questions: what does that mean, and how does it reflect on the Pharisee, the tax collector, and *us*?

People interpret receiving the Kingdom as a little child in different ways. Some emphasize the innocence of the children. Or open mindedness. Those both make some sense. My own interpretation has been shaped by stories my daughter Abbey has been telling me lately. You see, she has a growing relationship with a toddler named Finn. Finn is the son of one of the instructors at North Star, and is often on site there. When she has free time, Abbey loves to spend it with him. He has grown quite attached to her. It is mutual. Abbey is always beaming when she tells her stories about their time together. The other day she shared with me how

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 18:9.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18:15-17

adorable he was when she was wiping his mouth. Not just because he was especially cute right then, but because as she wiped his mouth he leaned forward into the wiping. Finn helped Abbey to help him. Babies need their care givers for everything. And they *know* it. And they help us to help them—at least on a good day!

Finn is utterly dependent on others to get along. We are in the same place with God. We are utterly dependent on God, and we are all God’s children. And that means that we work with everything God offers us. Which means working with God’s people, too. We cannot be in broken relationships with other people and stand in good relationship with God. And did you notice that *both* the Pharisee and the tax collector have troubled relationships with other people? Standing alone in a prominent place the Pharisee declares “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like *this tax collector...*”<sup>4</sup> Ouch! The Pharisee distances himself from the other children of God by calling them beneath him. He has decided that he is over and above God’s people. Yet, there is much that the Pharisee does which is, in fact, commendable. He fasts and tithes—both of which were exemplary spiritual practices in Jesus’ day, and still are today. While we may certainly regard the Pharisee as smug, he is also faithful in some important ways. He is neither saint nor sinner, but a muddled mixture. The Pharisee is gray.

In supposed contrast, the tax collector prays differently. He beats his breast in a traditional sign of mourning and says “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”<sup>5</sup> Jesus appears to approve of this way of being faithful, because he concludes the parable by saying: “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.”<sup>6</sup> However, given what we know about tax collectors in that day, Jesus is likely to be commending and justifying his *prayer style* rather than his whole life. Biblical commentator Chris Haslam summarizes the work of tax collectors as basically extorting “what they could from the populace,” and, “keeping the difference as profit.”<sup>7</sup> So, while the tax collector may have prayed well, he was still turning away from God’s people by extorting from them what he could. He was right to realize his sin, but we have no evidence that he actually turned away from it. He never repents, and we do not hear that his occupation changes. Like his counterpart the Pharisee, he is neither saint nor sinner, but a muddled mixture. The tax collector is also gray.

And I think that is precisely the larger point of the parable and what follows it. We are all gray. Sometimes we get a great prayer in, but we keep mistreating other people. Other times we puff

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 18:11.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 18:13.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 18:14.

<sup>7</sup> © 1996-2003 Chris Haslam—[montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/cpr30l.shtml](http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/cpr30l.shtml)

ourselves up as better than others, but we accomplish some good, too. None of us is saint or sinner fully. We are all a mixture. And we are something else as well—we are all God’s children. Partly made in God’s image; partly inclined to all sorts of sinning. Each and every one of us is gray. And as God’s gray little clay children, we are absolutely dependent on God’s grace. We may think that we can advance ourselves through righteous acts or confessing our sins—both of which are good things, indeed—but we will invariably miss something along the way. And that is where God comes in. We are not the architects of our own salvation, but thanks be to God, we have a Savior!

And that’s the good news of the gospel this morning. We are God’s beloved children, and God intends to save us from our sins. Each of us is called to lean in when God reaches out to us; to help God help us; and to realize our utter dependence on God’s grace.

Amen?

**Luke 18:9-17**

9He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14I 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.”

15People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. 16But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 17Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”