

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost—Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
June 12, 2016

Many of you may know that I spent most of my adult life doing specialized crisis ministry in hospitals and hospices. I'm grateful to have done crisis work, and I'm also grateful not to be doing it anymore. In those days, I had to keep up my certification for the work by taking thirty or so continuing education hours each year. As any of you who are required to do continuing education know, not all the options are of the highest quality. Some are fantastic and some are pretty terrible. One such terrible course was a four hour lecture I attended on Jungian dream analysis. It was awful; I remember sitting there in this hotel ballroom in the suburbs of Chicago listening to a psychologist drone on and on about the virtues of keeping a dream journal and of exploring one's subconscious. I'm sure these things are just fine, but they're not really for me.

My skepticism aside, I do remember this one smart thing that lecturer said. When talking about dreams, he suggested that it's important to consider that each character in the dream is really just a version of yourself. For instance, if you have a dream wherein you're fighting with your parent, imagine that, for the sake of the dream, you're playing both the part of the parent and the part of you.

I found that concept fascinating—not so much about dreams, which don't interest me very much—but rather how the concept might apply to the reading of stories in Scripture. I think it can be a little too easy to listen to a story from a Gospel and to say, “oh I'm such a great person, I would act just like Jesus!” or “I am such a terrible person, I would act just like the Pharisee.”

My experience in the world tells me that neither of those extremes is true. What seems more true to me is that **SOMETIMES** you might act like Jesus and **SOMETIMES** you might act like the Pharisee. There's a little saint and a little sinner in all of us, as far as I can tell.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus travels to the home of a Pharisee. Think of the Pharisees as the Jewish leaders who were the experts in the law—kind of like the Temple lawyers of the first century Palestine. They knew all the rules backward and forward. The Pharisees are a little bit skeptical of Jesus. Jesus is kind of a freelancer. He knows all the laws, but he didn't really go to Pharisee school. Imagine someone who had never taken the bar exam walking down Downer and giving legal advice. That's kind of how the Pharisees experienced Jesus. They didn't like him very much.

So, it is quite surprising that Jesus decides to eat with a Pharisee. Jesus accepts an invitation to dinner, and he is confronted by a woman off the street who comes to him with a bottle of precious oil. She begins to cry and to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and then to rub the expensive oil into them. The Pharisee is horrified, as you might imagine. Here is a woman who is not very clean, who is known by the whole town as a bad seed, a sinning lady. And Jesus allows her to wash his feet. And the Pharisee decides that Jesus can't be a very good prophet because he

spends his time with terrible people. Jesus fires back that the woman in the story is more grateful to God than the Pharisee ever could be, and Jesus uses her as an example to all future generations of what faith can look like. Jesus takes a person that the rest of society has completely discounted and says that they are the most important person in the room and that, in fact, we could all take a few lessons from her. No wonder the Pharisees didn't like Jesus very much.

I submit that we have all been filled at times with the prim judgment of the Pharisee. I believe we have all probably inhabited a space wherein we judged people for no good reason, we were addicted to the social or religious rules of a certain situation—where our own fear of the other made us rigid in our dos and don'ts. I also believe that we have all been the woman—somehow at the very end of our rope with nothing left to us but to beg God for mercy and to weep. And I really do believe that we have all had moments of great grace like Jesus, where we have found ourselves full of compassion and understanding of the plight of those less fortunate—where we have looked at the margins of society and seen God there, looking back at us. I think we have all had times when the little Christ inside of us has shown out.

So, what is the point of it all? If we are all capable of the radical goodness of Christ and of the nasty legalism of the Pharisee, how are we supposed to move through the world? What should God do with us when we're capable of such opposite actions?

God probably SHOULD move along and find another group of people to love. The real scandal of Christianity is that God chooses to love us ANYWAY. On the days when we act like the Pharisee, we are loved. On the days when we are full of the love of Christ, we are loved. On the days when we are desperate and crying, we are loved. That's the kind of God we serve—the one who lavishes on us love and mercy when we deserve it, and who lavishes on us love and mercy when we don't.

It's a foolish way to be a God, really. Surely God should reward the just and condemn the wicked. I don't know about you, but if that were the case, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't make the cut. God instead loves us in our imperfections, in our vulnerabilities, and, yes, loves us when we are acting like the Pharisee in the story. The miracle here is not that Jesus stood up to the Pharisee. The miracle is that God loves us even when we're acting LIKE a Pharisee. Amen.