

Don't Let In The Flies

Have you ever been so surprised at something that you sat or stood with your mouth open and couldn't say a word? For many of us, it happened in 2004, when the Red Sox won the World Series. We had been strung along in the past, particularly in 1975 and more famously, in 1986. So, when they finally won for the first time in our lifetimes, many of us were at first mouth-gaped open surprised and then, elated!

Lest you think we were the first to be like this, the hearers of Jesus' parables were equally surprised that he would take on the religious leaders as well as some of the cultural norms of his time. Today's parable is no different. Why would the original hearers be surprised at how these people were portrayed in the story?

First we have to consider what exactly Pharisees were supposed to do. The Pharisees were an influential religious sect within Judaism in the time of Christ and the early church. They were known for their emphasis on personal piety (the word *Pharisee* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "separated"), their acceptance of oral tradition in addition to the written Law, and their teaching that all Jews should observe all

600-plus laws in the Torah, including the rituals concerning ceremonial purification. The Pharisees were mostly middle-class businessmen and leaders of the synagogues. Though they were a minority in the Sanhedrin and held a minority number of positions as priests, they seemed to control the decision-making of the Sanhedrin because they had popular support among the people.

They were known to be sticklers for these 600 laws. Now, not all of them acted like the Pharisee in the story, but some of them deigned to announce how much “better” they were than those who were *not* Pharisees. Also, most people would not say anything to a Pharisee as they were afraid that their own actions would be pointed out and brought down by them. So, Jesus doing this was really a mouth-opening big deal.

We’ve discussed tax collectors in the past. Tax collector were usually Jewish men who lived in the region under Roman law. The Romans figured they were more likely to get taxes out of the people of the area if they had their “own kind” collect them. Now, the tax collectors were to collect the set amount of money put forward by the

Romans with the caveat that they could collect even more and keep it for themselves. When the Jewish population caught wind of this, they began to despise the tax collectors and certainly couldn't fathom that Jesus would even associate with them, let alone they be the hero or the good person in the parable.

This is what caused the original hearers, as well as subsequent followers of "the Way", to be amazed when they realized what Jesus was telling them. While WE are called to follow the laws of the land as well as the commandments, ALL OF US are claim to be believers are called to do the exact same thing. The question remains, though: Who are we called to preach to in these troubled times?

When I came here almost four years ago (has it already been that long?) I promised that I would not preach politics. I am not going to do so today, either. However, people are starting to really be affected by the actions of politicians, and to the point where it will make it even harder for us to follow the Gospel message in our response. Yes, we are called to follow the Gospel message. Yes, we are called to speak out for issues of injustice, just like Jesus did. And yes, we are called to do something

for those who have been or will be affected by the decisions that have been made or the unwillingness for people to come together to ensure that people in this country have what they need to survive.

Our role here is not to qualify who should receive what; Jesus simply said to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. Also, we have to understand that we may not yet be affected by lay-offs or losing SNAP benefits, but we will have to deal with the outcome of such decisions.

I do not deign to tell anyone who is acting like the Pharisee or who is acting like the tax collector. I do know that we are called to be humble and not draw attention to ourselves. This is the most important message we can take with us. We are called to follow Jesus and simply “do” without looking for any honors or privileges. It is a good message for all of us today. While we’re at it, we should not be surprised to find ourselves with our mouths open for the next surprise or amazing thing that will happen. I only hope that it will be a good surprise!!!