

Pentecost 23 (25C)
Trinity Seattle
October 23, 2016

[Luke 18:9-14](#)

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

Contempt.

The dictionary defines contempt as “the feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration, worthless, or deserving scorn.” It is a negative judgment on the worth or value of a person or group of people.

We’re all very aware of the role that contempt has played in our electoral politics this year: contempt for immigrants, contempt for women, contempt for Mexicans and Muslims, the presidential candidates’ mutual contempt for one another.

All of this contempt has had an effect on us. Election anxiety is a new thing, brought on by the growing culture of mutual contempt.

An article in the New York Times this past week starts out by saying, “It has been described as one of the most contentious, tawdry and angry presidential elections in history. And it’s taking a toll on our mental health.” The article says that 52 percent of Americans are dealing with “high levels of stress brought on by the election.”¹ It doesn’t seem to matter whether you’re a Republican or a Democrat or an Independent. It’s affecting people across the political spectrum. According the American Psychological Association, people are showing up at therapy appointments talking about their fears, their anger, and their anxiety about the election. And whether we’ve talked to a therapist about it or not ourselves, I think most of us know at some level what they’re dealing with.

Have you ever heard or felt so much overt contempt?

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/20/well/mind/talking-to-your-therapist-about-election-anxiety.html?_r=0

Contempt falls well outside the normally accepted bounds of civil political discourse. It is not unusual for citizens and their politicians to argue bitterly on issues. But this is different.

And as tempting as it is to blame it on individual political figures, I think it must be said (and I'm not the first to say it) that we get the politicians we deserve. They do not appear out of nowhere. There will need to be a lot of soul searching when this election is over.

How did this happen?

It's more obvious than ever that there are deep, underlying elements of contempt toward and fear of "the other" in our country that have made certain politicians attractive to large segments of our society. Anxieties around our changing demographics and the loss of the white male monopoly on power are being felt by many. Our unresolved legacy of racial inequality, and the growing reality of economic inequality are fueling the frantic search for scapegoats – something, someone to blame. And that desperate search for someone to blame makes it far too easy to fall back on the stereotypes and prejudices and yes fears of people we have never really come to know – people we don't really want to know – because if we did, it could undermine the narrative we have told ourselves about why they are to blame for our problems.

I found myself face to face with some of my own prejudices recently. I was at an event where the speaker was a man who had spent many years in prison – for murder. But as I listened to him talk for about 40 minutes, my picture of who this person was changed dramatically. Shaka Senghor is an African-American guy from Detroit. Maybe some of you have heard of him. I'm not a television watcher, but he was recently on Oprah, and maybe some of you saw him there or have seen his TED Talk. He started out by telling a room full of several hundred people about a day when he was ten years old. He'd always been a good student and this day he had gotten the highest award in his class for something. He was so proud of himself. He was eager to get home and tell his mother what he had accomplished. As he walked in the door at home, he heard her screaming, and soon there were things flying across the room at him. It was a common thing in his very dysfunctional home just prior to his parents divorcing. He never got the chance to tell his mother what he was so proud of that day.

By the time he was fourteen, he decided he couldn't live there anymore. He left home for the streets of Detroit, and he got involved in all the things you would imagine. It was right in the middle of the crack epidemic in the 80s. He was a gang member, ran drugs, often found himself in life-threatening situations involving guns and violence. When he was 19 he was involved in a deal gone bad, and he shot a man and killed him. He went to prison for second degree murder.

He described the horrors of being a kid in prison. He was as tough as the next guy, though, and developed a reputation as someone not to be messed with. Got in lots of trouble in prison and ended up spending five whole years in solitary confinement, with only one hour a day outside of his 5x7 foot cell, with no human contact. Always the curious student, he spent his time reading books – one at a time. His intellectual curiosity led him to the classics – Plato and the philosophers. He read history and social theory. He became a self-educated person in prison. He loved to write and spent virtually all of his time either reading or writing.

Shaka said told us about three miracle he experienced while in solitary confinement that changed his life. The first was a letter that came in the mail. He opened it and began reading it, and it was from the mother of the man he had murdered. He almost wadded it up and threw it in the corner rather than reading it. But he started reading as she talked about how her son's death had affected her family. He had taken away not only her son, but the father of two young children. He almost couldn't take any more, but he kept on. After talking about all the horrible things that had come from her son's death, she said "but that's not why I'm writing to you. I'm writing to you to say that I forgive you." She had decided that she couldn't live any longer with her hatred toward him, and that the only way she could be released from it was to forgive him. He was shocked. He kept reading. "And, she said, I not only forgive you, but I love you." She said she knew that there must be something terribly painful in his life for him to have lived this way. He broke into tears. It was the first time in his life that anyone had ever said to him that they loved him.

That was miracle number one.

Another letter came from his son. He was now a ten year old boy without a father. He said his mom had told him why he was in prison. And he just wanted

to say to him how disappointed he was, and that he wanted him to think about what Jesus would want him to do from now on. Again he cried, feeling the guilt and the shame of how his actions had affected the life of this young boy.

That was miracle number two.

After four years in solitary confinement, he had written the manuscript to what would become his first book. He would stand up in his cell to catch the last glimpses of light on the edge of his window sill in the evening, scribbling down his notes. He found a way to send his “book” written on scraps of paper off to a publisher for review. Eventually another letter came – this one from a publisher, who said that his book had real promise, and that they wanted to publish it.

That was miracle number three.

In 2010 Shaka was released from prison after 19 years behind bars. His most recent book is a memoir titled “*Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption In An American Prison.*” He teaches in universities and has become a leading voice on prison reform. He is a mentor and speaks often in schools and prisons to young people about his experience of personal transformation.

What about that gospel we heard today? A man stands in the temple saying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or like this drug dealer, thug, murderer, ex-convict, ...”

How often our contempt toward others, whether because of race or religion, or yes their actions, keeps us from seeing their true humanity, from seeing the person that God created and still sees in them.

Contempt may sound like a harsh word for many of us. But even just our assumptions and prejudices about those who differ from us can keep us from really listening to and hearing another person. And perhaps that person is not a person of another race or culture or religion, but someone of a different political persuasion.

We’re invited in this little parable today to be as conscious of our own shortcomings as we are of others’. That seems like a good place for us all to begin.