

Last Thursday on my way to Freeman Toyota, I drove beneath an overpass covered with political messages. You may have even seen it. It's right where Hwy 12 merges onto 101 South. What distinguished this overpass from all the others I'd encountered was that this one was less campaign trail than town hall meeting. There were flags hanging right side up and flags hanging upside down. There were signs telling us the only way to save our freedom was by voting NO on Prop 50. Other signs proclaimed that unless we voted YES on Prop 50, the very democracy upon which this country was built was doomed. I've never seen a clearer explanation of the muddle we find ourselves in these days. Not a titanic clash of opposites, because everyone wanted to save democracy. They just weren't sure quite what such salvation looked like.

It felt to me like reading the Bible. Prophets, judges, warriors, and kings, all claiming to have the word of God.

Had I not signed on the dotted line on the day of my ordination "that I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation;" I might have thrown up my hands at the Bible's seemingly contradictory set of stories and teachings long ago. But I take vows very seriously. If the Bible is the Word of God, and I think that it is, then the seeming contradictions are there for a reason. This led to a great deal of study across five different faith traditions. Thirty years of living in scripture have taught me that sacred texts do not function like instruction manuals;

they are an account of the conditions, questions, and answers offered by life. It is not contradiction we see, but diversity. There is no single answer to a history whose only constant is change. Life has many seasons and many meanings. We are all of us very different and gifted in myriad ways and we need a Bible whose good news brings us together rather than driving us apart.

Meanwhile, the world around us is doing everything it can to separate us. We have inherited a competitive, and often violent, culture that demands an absolute winner. That requires a hierarchy of race, gender, and species. And the harder we compete against one another, the harder we fight for supremacy, the more divided we become.

Which was certainly what I saw on that overpass. Voting for the right proposition, the right candidate, was not just a political choice, it was the path to salvation. I was taught to believe that salvation came from God, not politicians. Seventy-five years hanging out with God has done nothing to change my mind, but as more and more people have grown disillusioned with God and with religion, or, worse yet, twist these things to promote their own agendas, a lot of spiritual passion has been deflected into politics.

Too many of us want a Messiah in the White House, not a president.

And lest it be forgot, there were a lot of people in Jesus' time who also wanted Jesus in the White House. Or at least duking it out with the Romans.

The hope of a political savior who will raise me up and take care of my enemies is not hope, but fear. How can I find my tribe even when the media goes crazy denouncing "tribalism?" Many of us feel like Jesus' bewildered disciples when, as the rich young man walked away, asked their teacher, "Who then can be saved?"

We've known for millennia that something is very wrong. We just don't know exactly what.

So let me ask. What did Jesus arrive to save us from? Don't say "sin." That's what the catechism says. I want to know what does being saved mean to you? Do I equate salvation with privilege? Do I want to be saved from oppression? From narcissistic personality disorder? From the fear of suffering and death? Do I want to be saved from myself? Or, since Jesus was a healer, what is the nature of the malady from which he sought to heal us? Is disease an individual problem or is it the bountiful fruit of a very toxic culture?



I chose the image of disease as fruit quite intentionally. Jesus called us to be seeds and bear fruit in abundance. Jesus asks that we go deep into the soil in which we were planted, to germinate, grow, blossom, feed the hungry and heal the hurts of a broken people. Despite Paul's looking forward to the crown of righteousness, salvation doesn't wait for us to die. It wants us to live in this world, as Jesus lived in this world, a world which then, as now, seems beyond repair, but to work to heal it anyway. To bring enemies together as friends. Sin, for Jesus, was not always personal. Did you ever hear Jesus blame the victim? He knew that we can be broken by things that are not our fault. Is it a sin to come down with cancer when you live next door to a chemical refinery? Is it a bad life-style choice not to be able to afford to move away? And what if I am benefiting from injustice? Is it my fault that the business culture has been good to me, showered me with praise for a job well done and passed laws `than I might have much for which to be grateful?

In today's parable, Jesus gives us two people who are dealing with these very questions.

The first, a Pharisee, realizes his predicament. He lives in an unjust society and does not want to be tainted by it. He must maintain the integrity of his tradition against overwhelming odds. He cannot change the world, but he can set himself apart from it, keeping all the feasts, fasts, and tithes not in the corrupt context of a Romanized temple, but in the sanctity of his own home. He's educated and has thought this out, and later his example will help and sustain other people who live in

impossible circumstances. He has both the financial resources and education to set himself apart. And for that he is grateful. He is chosen.

The second, a tax collector, chose a career in finance and the chance to partner with Rome. Possibly he did so because he thought he could render unto Caesar without being tainted. Jews had collaborated with their oppressors in the past – look at Daniel in Babylon and Esther in Persia—and made them better people. The tax collector worked hard. His career allowed him to feed his family and to prosper and maybe raise a son with the resources and skills to become a Pharisee.

The real question that both Pharisee and Tax Collector faced was how does a person live in a world where few things are clear? Can I be a good person when there is so much wrong around me? Why, when this world has treated me well, do I still feel uneasy? Is my world toxic, or just in need of a little improvement?

The Pharisee, like many of us, like me, is grateful to not have to deal with a lot of this, to appreciate his own goodness even when the world around him is hard for so many. He is grateful that God has spared him.

Meanwhile, the tax collector has a revelation. He falls to his knees in grief over decisions he once thought he'd made in good faith. He realizes that he is in way over his head and cannot live without God's help.

That's what repentance is, you know. It's the realization that I cannot do it alone. That I'll never get it right without help. Repentance is saying to God: I've done good things and bad things and sometimes the bad things turn out for the better and

what I think are good things are nothing but self-congratulatory snark. God, I need you! I need the Good News. Suddenly, when I'm on my knees, in the quiet of my heart, I understand. Good news can never lead to divisions and hatreds and bombings or despair that I am a lost cause, and no, I am not a lost cause because when I fall on my knees I can feel God's hands in mine, lifting me to new awareness, because good news is by its essential nature the antidote to all that tears us apart, individually and collectively. There's nothing shameful or judgmental about repentance. It can take a while—I didn't realize how deeply buried my own dark side was until I went looking to repent of it, but when I did, the energy of love, renewal, and hope was overwhelming, and I saw my flaws, not as an angry God's judgment of me, but as powerful energy I had yet to understand.

This is what the Pharisee can't know, because he thinks he has both God and himself figured out. The real sin is refusing to grow.

We all want to be loved. We all want a world in which we are able to give love. We all want a world to which we fully belong. Jesus is love. Love is courage. Love makes everything possible. There is no better time to discover this than right now, when even an overpass is arguing.

And slyly as I raise the eyes of my heart, I look at that overpass again, and there is Jesus, both his right arm and his left arm outstretched in love. The signs are gone because the fear is gone. Such is the coming of the Christ. Amen.