October 23, 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22; Luke 18:9-14

by Willie Dwayne Francois III in the October 12, 2016 issue

"Nobody is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart," writes James Baldwin, "for his purity, by definition, is unassailable." Such people clothe themselves in religion while creating hell for others. They see everything but their truest selves. Being born again means stripping away the things that create distance between God and us and between us and others—but this can cause anxiety and pain. It's easier to do as we're so often taught: to hide our vulnerabilities and practice spiritual dishonesty about our shortcomings.

Jesus instructs a crowd of people intoxicated by their own sense of righteousness that they are blind to themselves. They "trusted in themselves," but they cannot actually see themselves. They can finger the flaws in others without ever truly approaching their own. In his story of a Pharisee's self-righteousness and a tax collector's soul hunger, Jesus disrupts the spiritual elitism of the religious.

In the story, Jesus praises a man whose job makes him an enemy of Israel. He shifts the moral authority from the good religious folk to a man ostensibly with a past, one who gives no indication of tendering his resignation as an agent of the Roman Empire. The original audience expects the story to affirm the Pharisee, the religious insider whose life illustrates scriptural literacy and moral impunity. It doesn't.

What the story does offer is a window into this particular Pharisee's mentality, through the words of his prayer. He embraces the insider-outsider politics of institutional religion. His public prayer creates a firewall between him and humanity. He prays his way into a posture that alienates others.

We do this too sometimes. We use prayer to create religious piñatas we can beat with our demonizing words and dismissive practices. When Luke says Jesus' listeners "regarded others with contempt," the Greek word for contempt suggests treating people as nothing. This is the danger of religious othering: it makes people disposable things in the so-called pursuit of perfect holiness.

But is perfection what God wants from us? In our world, the template for perfection generally reflects the prejudices of the dominant culture. Anything different is

labeled deficient. When we steer our lives toward the myth of perfection, we dwarf our uniqueness, flatten our particularity, and bleach the glory of God. This sanitized faith undermines God's unorthodox compassion.

This culture of false perfection means to live a lie, a betrayal of the truth: that God loves us with our scars of disobedience, markers of mistakes, and wounds of worry. Such a culture creates myriad communities of throwaways, of people perceived as disposable. Even churches consecrate categories by which they effectively label people disposable. When we fail to see ourselves as we are, we tragically fix our eyes on others—and we live with spiritual blinders on. This derails our journey to wholeness and transformation.

The Pharisee is not guilty of any of the specific things he names. Yet there is a litany of unnamed sins that could register from his heart—and it's hard to transform what you aren't willing to name. The tax collector avoids narrating a long list of his own vices and virtues to God, but he names his condition: he's a sinner. He beats his chest and pleads for mercy.

Self-deception that stalls transformation can become a crisis at the national level as well. When Israel fails to pray for its own transformation and repentance, Jeremiah avers on the nation's behalf: "Indeed our apostasies are many, and we have sinned against you." The nation's sin includes feeding on the most vulnerable people within it. Nations still do this.

And nations, like individuals, struggle to look in the moral mirror. "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves," said Michelle Obama at the Democratic National Convention. That's a historical fact about the White House—one that's often relegated to a footnote or simply omitted. Yet many found the statement to be controversial. The institution of slavery funded the greatness of America—and 151 years later, the American check still bounces.

Jeremiah expresses the national need for repentance. The nation needs mercy. For 400 years, black people have been dehumanized in America—from the trafficking of my ancestors from their native land through years of slavery, Jim Crow, Black Codes and predatory sharecropping, unchecked lynching, redlining and residential segregation, mass incarceration, undereducation, mass criminalization, and police violence. To change—to be redeemed—America has to actually look at itself. We have to stand squarely in front of the moral mirror, beat our chests, name our sins, and be justified.