

## **Pet Peeves** **October 23, 2022**

I'd like to talk about pet peeves today. A pet peeve is anything that gets under your skin and really annoys you, often more than is rational.

I've shared with you a while back, one of my pet peeves is discourteous drivers. If traffic is stopped, and a driver cuts out into the shoulder and then cuts back in farther up the line, my blood is boiling. I get irrationally annoyed.

For you, maybe that's not your pet peeve. Maybe yours is when people chew gum and snap it loudly.

Maybe it's hearing a dripping faucet that drives you batty.

Maybe it's when you're wearing socks around the house and you step in a little bit of water, and your socks get wet.

Maybe it's watching a recipe video where they don't scrape out the bowl of ingredients.

Maybe it's cars that are modified to make the engines louder, so suddenly a VW Bug sounds like a monster truck.

Maybe it's (adjust stole) looking at a stole that is uneven that makes you twitch.

We all have pet peeves. We might call them "first-world problems," things that don't really matter or affect our lives, but they annoy us. I'd be curious to hear your pet peeves on your way out today. Because as much as there is that divides us as human beings, I think pet peeves, strangely enough, provide a source of unity. We all agree that trying to spread rock-hard butter on toast is incredibly frustrating.

I had a gathering with the local pastors last week, and at one point, someone brought up the question, "What was Jesus' pet peeve?"

One pastor offered simply, "Sin." We believe that sin is anything that separates us from the love God. That could be our behavior; it could be our thoughts or desires; sin could be what we fail to do. We say in our confession, forgive us for "things done and left undone," or in our New Zealand confession, "some sins escape us;" we don't even know all of our sins.

So sin as a pet peeve of Jesus. But then another pastor chimed in. Instead of sin, he said, he wondered if Jesus' biggest pet peeve was self-righteousness. And that got me thinking. I think there's some truth to that.

Just look at our Gospel lesson today. Jesus tells a parable about two men who go to the Temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. Now Pharisees certainly get short shrift in the Gospels, but the reality was that the Pharisees were really well-liked in Jesus' day.

They were faithful people, but they weren't exclusive. Politically, they didn't support the Roman occupiers, but they didn't act violently against them, like Zealots did. They were good, faithful people, the Pharisees.

On the other hand, tax collectors were seen as sell-outs to the Roman government. More than that, they were often dishonest and fleeced people out of their hard-earned money. (I'll say a bit more about that next week, when we hear about another tax collector).

So knowing that Pharisees were faithful and honest and that tax collectors were dishonest toadies, we might be surprised when we hear Jesus' parable. The Pharisee is clearly self-righteous. "Thanks, God, that I'm not like other people, like this tax collector here. I fast religiously; and I tithe (give 10% of my income to the church)." Side note: tithing is not evil. Tithing is wonderful. Just a clarification during this Stewardship season.

On the other hand, the tax collector is having a dark night of the soul. He is coming to terms with the life that he has lived, and he realizes that he needs help. He needs forgiveness. He begs of God, "Have mercy on me, a sinner!" Just hearing those words hit home for us.

Jesus gives his lesson: the tax collector is the one who went home "justified" – made righteous, cleansed. The Pharisee didn't do much for himself or for God.

This story is like so many others in the Gospels. It's not the sinful people that Jesus criticizes; it's those who think they don't need God's grace. Sin is forgivable. Sin is almost expected. Everyone messes up. Everyone does or says or thinks things that create distance between themselves and God (or themselves and others). When we sin, we recognize it; we apologize. We make amends where we can. Sin is easy.

But self-righteousness is much more dangerous. Self-righteousness says, "I don't need to change. I don't need any help from God or others, thank you very much." Self-righteousness is tricky.

So I think that there is some truth in that pastor's idea that self-righteousness is higher up the list of Jesus' pet peeves than sin. Jesus certainly speaks out more harshly against it than sin.

Self-righteousness also sneaks up in our culture, doesn't it? If you have turned on a TV in the past month, you've probably seen the political ads that are running. I'll tell you, I have yet to see an ad that says, "My name is Jane Smith, and here are my priorities that I'll address if I'm elected."

No, it's more, "Do you know what the other guy did?" Or, "Here's what I've done in the past to save our country." The self-righteousness just oozes from these ads.

And so it's easy for us to fall into that way of thinking. Whether talking about politics, whether thinking about our opinions, when driving (that's my preferred locale of self-righteousness, much to my wife's dismay), it's easy to think that others have it all wrong. I find myself getting high and mighty even when I run on the trail here. I run there at least once a week all through the winter, and I get grumpy in the spring when the weather gets nice and there are too many people on my trail. I think, "You are cramping my style!" True confessions of a priest.

Aldous Huxley wrote a powerful book called *Brave New World*, in which he imagines a future dystopian society. The society is organized into 5 classes or castes. The first caste is brought up to look down on the 2<sup>nd</sup> class. The class is raised to look down on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. And so on. And the 5<sup>th</sup> class is taught to look down on the 1<sup>st</sup> class.

The commentary that Huxley is making is that self-righteousness can be a tool that helps control people. If you can get angry at another group, you don't look for people ones who are actually causing problems (which, in the case of the book is the government).

So self-righteousness is not only a spiritual issue, but I think it is also a social issue, and one that is poisoning our society.

So what is the cure, the antidote? I believe that it is relationship. Imagine if the Pharisee had walked over and talked to that tax collector. Imagine if he had heard the honest, gut-wrenching prayer that the tax collector was saying. It would've changed his viewpoint about tax collectors.

Imagine if those politicians in the ads actually worked with their colleagues to do what's best for the American people, rather than what gets them elected in their territory. Imagine if we could talk with other drivers somehow and hear how that driver is wrestling with anxiety right now.

Jesus has a lot to say about self-righteousness. And Jesus demonstrates for us the way to avoid it: go out of your way to be in authentic community with as many people as possible. To have a conversation with the people unlike us. To view the world from another perspective. To form relationships with those who are different.

In doing so, not only do we avoid self-righteousness, but we create the beloved community of God.

Amen.