A Pharisee. We twenty-first century Christians are way ahead of Jesus’ first-century crowd when we hear that title at the beginning of this parable. We know all about those Pharisees.

And Samaritan. We know all about them, too, don’t we? Tax collector, too, though to a lesser extent, perhaps, because we might have our own 21st-century grimacing reaction to that title.

What we forget is that our reactions to biblical Pharisees and Samaritans is likely the opposite of the reactions within Jesus’ audience. We’re accustomed to thinking of the Pharisees as the bad guys and the Samaritans (and to a lesser extent, the tax collectors) as the good guys, because that’s how they seem to come off in Jesus’ stories and parables.

At some point during Holy Week I typically make a big deal—because it is a big deal—of commenting on the recurrent term “the Jews” at various points in the Passion narrative. I remind us all that the evangelists, the gospelers, are not talking about The Jews in a blanket way, but about the corrupt Jewish leaders at the time (not even all those leaders, but the corrupt ones).

And about those in the crowd who are being manipulated by them. That usually leads to an acknowledgement that the unfortunate nomenclature in the gospels led to centuries of extreme, sometimes violent, discrimination. It still can contribute to lingering anti-Semitism in some dark corners within Christian believers.

Similarly, many preachers—this one included—go to some lengths to point out that the Samaritans were a stigmatized group within Judaism and that Jesus chose in his most widely-known parable to cast a Samaritan in the role of the good guy, the compassionate and loving figure. Because that was the opposite of what his audience would expect, that this outcast would save the poor abused traveler. Now we even have “good Samaritan laws,” due to our common understanding of the text.

All the foregoing was prompted by something I heard on my way back from the Vestry meeting Thursday night. It was a podcast, and not the political or true crime ones I sometimes listen in on. This was a religious one.

I admit that I don’t listen to many of those. Like one. Or maybe two. And not that often.

This is one is called Pulpit Fiction, an obvious play on the name of the famous Quentin Tarantino film (not for everyone for sure, but a favorite of mine). Each episode even begins with that driving Del-Tones surfer theme song from the movie.

The hosts, two protestant pastors from Illinois, have an engaging style as they talk about the readings for the upcoming Sunday, inviting guests to join the conversation.

They point out that the easy approach, and I have done this myself on occasion, is to preach on one of the obvious themes of pride versus humility, rigid rule-following versus open-heartedness, or even self-righteousness versus self-reflection.

But let’s return to the Pharisee for a moment. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine is an eminent scholar who specializes on Jewish approaches to the New Testament and was a recent visitor to Pulp Fiction. She is for example, the co-editor of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* and reminds us that the Pharisees were as varied in their beliefs, backgrounds, and lifestyles as members of practically any human group we could name. Some of them were followers of Jesus. Paul, for example, was a Pharisee.

Put differently, we are the Pharisees of our day. We come to church on Sundays. We invest time and money and energy in the good work the Church does—worshiping, feeding the hungry, keeping people safe, and generally being compassionate followers of Jesus and his gospel. And we are a varied lot, holding all kinds of differing views on politics, economy, and even matters of faith and scripture.

Jesus, in parable after parable and example after example, told people that belonging to this group or that one was no automatic guarantee of sanctity or capturing God’s favor.

As a matter of fact this parable is not directed at that Pharisee, and certainly not Pharisees in general. Luke tells us who it’s for. He introduces this parable by writing, “Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” They were his target audience.

The Pulpit Fiction boys go on to talk about how tempting it is to fall into the parabolic Pharisee’s trap by saying or thinking, “Thank you, God, that I’m not like him, judging people in that way.” And of course, by drawing that conclusion we’ve also drawn the line Jesus seeks to obliterate, the line between ourselves and those other people. Whoever they are.

Because whoever else they are, they are our sisters and brothers, all of us children of God.

*The* line of the podcast episode, for me, comes from someone they quote, someone whom I’ve not read, Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her book *Pastrix*. And she says it in a clearer way than has ever occurred to me: “Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it.”

That was the eye-opener for me, the challenge of the gospel. Jesus’ own challenge to find our true and deep connection with each other, with Jesus, with God and all of God’s creation, even when we would find comfort in a parable such as this by thinking, “at least I’m not like her or him or them.”

So now we’ve got this, once for all, right? Wouldn’t that be nice? At least on some level. Nope, we will definitely get it wrong. Maybe later today, even. But the great good news is that we’re called not to perfection but to faithfulness, and we are forgiven when we fall short—just like all those folks whom we would place on the other side of the line, where Jesus always is.

Thank God for God, and Jesus, and each other, as we seek to follow this path of compassion and love, not to win points with God, but for its own sake, seeing everyone as God’s child, connected to us in our common humanity. + + +