

“Seeing Others, Seeing Ourselves”
Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

I want to tell you a story today. It's a story I heard earlier this year and it has stuck with me. It's actually a children's book, but like many children's stories, it might really be for adults. You may know it, and if you do, all the better. It's called “Sidney and Norman: a tale of two pigs.” And it goes like this:

In a quiet street, in a quiet town, lived two pigs. They didn't oink or eat slop—no this isn't that kind of story. They wore suit coats and went to work. And even though they lived right next door to each other, they didn't know each other's names. The pig on the right was Norman. He was a very good pig. Rules and hard work had always come easily to him, and it showed. His house was neat and organized. He always looked his very best. He gave money to the “needy,” and never missed church on Sunday. Norman's teachers liked him when he was young and his boss at work liked him now that he was all grown up. He was pretty sure God liked him, too. After all, he was a very good pig. Norman figured that everyone could be as good as he was, if they'd just try a little harder. He wondered why they didn't.

The pig on the left was Sidney. Things didn't come quite as easily for Sidney. Rules and systems and schedules seemed, well, a bit slippery. One minute he thought he had them, and the next minute--- whoops! Where'd they go?

He was forever running ten minutes late, and could never manage, no matter how hard he tried, to get his tie perfectly straight. Not like his neighbor . . . what was his name?

Sidney got in trouble at school, which frustrated his teachers. He got in trouble at work, which frustrated his boss. He knew God was watching, and figured he was pretty frustrated, too. But most of all, Sidney frustrated Sidney. Why was everything so hard? Why couldn't he be more like . . . oh, what was his name?

Sidney felt broken. And some days that made it hard to get up in the morning. Somedays, in fact, Sidney couldn't get up at all.

Since Sidney was usually late and Norman was usually early, they very seldom saw each other. Unless, that is, they happened to fetch their mail at the same time. Which is exactly what happened one bright morning in October. Now, normally is Sidney saw Norman, he would look down and suffle back inside. He wa sure Norman was staring at this tie, or his hair, or the papers half-stuck into his briefcase. He was sure Norman was looking down on him for being messy. Which, for the most part, was absolutely correct.

But this day Norman didn't look at Sidney's tie and Sidney didn't look away because they were both staring at the small, pale blue envelopes they had received in the mail. One was addressed to Norman, and the other to Sidney. Hmm. Had someone invited them both to the same party?

Eager to unravel the mystery, the two pigs opened their envelopes. Norman read, "Dear Norman" and Sidney read, "Dear Sidney," followed by: "I would like you to come visit me at 77 Elm Street next Tuesday at your convenience. I have something to tell you." They both glanced at the bottom of the page and read: "Sincerely, God." Sidney and Norman reread the invitations several times to make sure they had read them correctly. God wanted to talk to them? On Tuesday? On Elm Street?

Sidney panicked. Deep in his heart was a familiar feeling—the feeling he had when, as a young pig, his teacher had sent him to the principal's office. Terror. Panic. Doom.

Norman smiled. He, too, felt a familiar feeling—the feeling he had felt when, as a young pig, he was called up in front of the school to receive an award. Anticipation. Happiness. Pride.

Sidney taped this invitation to the inside of his front door so he wouldn't lose it. Norman entered the date neatly in his datebook. Both pigs had trouble sleeping that night, for very different reasons.

Tuesday came. Norman awoke early, dressed, and headed down the street with the pale blue envelope firmly in hand. Just waking up, Sidney saw him pass by the window and rushed for the shower.

Norman walked tall and proud. Others on the street noticed he looked a bit taller—and more than a

little puffier—than usual that morning. His hair was neat and his tie extraordinarily straight. Much straighter than anyone else's on the street! God would certainly be pleased.

Norman found the address and went inside, greeting the woman at the front desk with his “important” voice. He directed him down a long hall, through a heavy wooden door and into a large room, where he found God sitting behind an immense desk. The sight made Norman nervous. But then, he thought, what did he have to be nervous about? He was a good pig.

God walked around the desk and smiled at the puffed up pig. “I’m glad you could make it,” he said warmly. “I have a few things to tell you. First of all,” God began, “I love you.” Norman smiled, though he wasn't surprised. “Secondly, your goodness is not the reason I love you.” Norman startled a little. What a curious thing for God to say. “Thirdly,” God continued, “you're not as good as you have led yourself to believe. You're prideful. You're selfish. You look down on others, simply because things don't come as easily for them.”

God looked a little sad now. “I love them just as much as I love you. Don't look down on those I love.” Then God smiled and returned to his desk. “That is what I needed to tell you.” Norman swallowed hard. That was the award? That was the commendation? Confused, he turned and ran down the hall, past the front desk and back out onto the street. His head was spinning. He felt dizzy. Was God finding fault with him? He was good pig!

He noticed his tie was off-kilter, and hurried to straighten it. Not perfect, but at least better than that fellow over there in the yellow jacket. Or the guy in the blue. Or any of these people, for that matter! Then it hit him: He was looking down on those people. Right then! Right there! Just like God had said! And he'd done it yesterday—and the day before! Twenty times a day at least! Norman's face grew hot. God was right! He was selfish! He was prideful! For the first time in his life, the good pig had to face the fact that he had been very, very bad. His pride in his “goodness” was his sin! He buried his face in his hands and hurried home, tears splashing on his neat gray suit.

From his window, Sidney saw his neighbor return—and froze in shock. Was he crying? Sidney

couldn't breathe. Oh dear. Oh dear. If that's what a visit with God did to that guy . . . oh! He was doomed. Hands shaking, Sidney tried one more time to get his tie to lie just right. Why was it so hard? Now where was his hat? Not on the hook, of course. Oh, under the couch. Hat in hand, he peeled the pale blue envelope off the door and stepped outside.

A bird was singing that morning, but Sidney didn't hear it. The sun was shining brightly, but Sidney didn't see it. Doomed, he thought. Doomed. Sidney trudged down the sidewalk, and suddenly was back in school. A little pig, headed down the long hall toward the principal's office. Hands sweating. Heart racing. Doomed.

He'll see right through me, Sidney thought as he turned onto Elm Street. My messes, my mistakes—everything. And then he was there. Though he had walked as slowly as he could, he was there. Sidney stepped inside. He tried to say something to the woman at the front desk, but found he couldn't speak. She smiled and motioned him to a heavy wooden door down the hall. He gulped.

A few moments later he stood before the door. He wanted to run away. He wanted to hide. But there was no place to go and nothing to hide behind. So, hat in hand, he pushed open the door and slipped inside. And there, behind the desk, was God. Sidney gulped again.

"I'm glad you could come," God said, smiling. Sidney tried to respond, but couldn't make a noise. "I wanted to tell you something," God continued as he came around the desk. Sidney glance around nervously. Maybe if he apologized--

"First of all," God began, "I love you." Sidney startled—surprised. "Secondly," God continued in a quieter voice, "I love you." Sidney was gripping his hat a little less tightly now. "And thirdly . . ." God paused, very close to Sidney. *"I love you." The look in God's eyes warmed Sidney right down to his toes. "That is what I wanted to tell you," God said as he stepped back toward his desk, still smiling. Sidney stood frozen for a moment; then realizing God had finished, he turned and ran quickly from the room. "I don't understand," he said aloud when he reached the street. "Didn't he see me? Didn't he see who I am?" It didn't make sense. Then it occurred to Sidney-- "I did it! I fooled him!"*

Sidney looked at the others on the street, smiling. “Yes, that must be it! I looked good when it was most important—and he bought it!” Just then Sidney caught his reflection in a store window. His hair was ruffled. His tie, off-kilter as usual, sported a large toothpaste stain. His smile vanished. That couldn't be it. He couldn't have fooled anybody—no looking like that.

Sidney was confused. There was only one other possibility—that God . . . just . . . loved him. Exactly like he was. Messes and all. Sidney felt the warmth he had seen in God's eyes welling up inside him again. Others on the street would later talk about the small, messy pig that day that appeared to be, well, glowing. All the way home Sidney looked for words to tell everyone what he was feeling, but all he found were tears. Happy tears. Lots of them.

The next day, two pigs emerged from their homes on a bright, crisp October morning and looked at each other. The pig on the left, named Sidney, who seemed a bit taller than before, looked at his neighbor's neat straight tie and clean clothes—and smiled. The pig on the right, named Norman, who seemed ever so slightly less “puffy,” looked at this neighbor's crooked tie and ruffled hair—and smiled. It was a real smile too. The kind that comes from deep inside. The kind he hadn't smiled in a long, long time. Sidney and Norman became good friends. There will still mornings now and then when Norman would wake up feeling a little “puffy.” But all he had to do was remember what he had learned at 77 Elm Street. Then the puffiness would quickly vanish and his real smile would return. As for Sidney, he still had his share of messes, though not as many as before. And there were still a few days when he wasn't quite sure he could get up in the morning. But if you stood outside his window on one of those days, this is what you'd hear:

“First of all, he loves me. Secondly, he loves me. And thirdly—he loves me.”

And that was all it took.¹

For us too. I don't know if you're a Sidney or a Norman, if you're a Pharisee or a Tax collector, but the truth is that there are no “good pigs.” We're all broken in one way or another. And we just need to be

¹ Vischer, Phil. *Sidney and Norman: a tale of two pigs*. Nashville: Tommy Nelson Publishers. 2006.

reminded of that every once in a while. And we need to be constantly reminded that God loves us. And that God love him and her and those people over there. Sometimes we are so busy looking at ourselves that we ignore those other people. And sometimes we are so busy looking at other people that we don't appreciate ourselves. God loves you. And God loves me. And it's not because of what we do. It's because of who he is.