There is the old joke that if you and your friend are being chased by a bear you don’t have to be faster than the bear, you just have to be faster than your friend. Which sort of demonstrates the fact that much of life is graded on a curve. Our ability to do anything well is sometimes a relative measure and may often indicate not our own strength but by the relative weakness of those with whom we are compared. Winning the award for best Norwegian restaurant in Albuquerque is not quite the same feat as winning the award for best Mexican restaurant in Albuquerque. However, the issue that arises with relativistic measures is that they may not tell us a whole lot. Certainly we can be better than the competition, but with relativistic measures we can also be incentivized to sabotage the competition, like the Really Rottens used to always try and do on Scooby's All-Star Laff-A Lympics. But its not just mediocre Saturday morning cartoons where this phenomenon plays out. In our Gospel today where we hear among other things, “Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’" They then follow up this complaint by saying, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.” Or put another way you guys aren’t so great, look at all the bad stuff you do. And in the relativity Olympics the Pharisees are good by virtue of their competition being bad. If Jesus and his disciples are just a bunch of low-life sinners than anything they say is of little or no consequence.

In the world of logic this is known as the genetic fallacy or the fallacy of origin. So for example, if I tell you that your shoe is untied you might respond by saying, “Why should I listen to you…you are from Fresno, you guys dehydrate apricots.” In this scenario I have been deemed unworthy of having an opinion on the state of your shoes because of who I am and where I come from. Similarly, in the minds of the Pharisees, Jesus can be discounted because he eats with the wrong kinds of people and his disciples do not fast.

Now it might be helpful to have a little context in terms of today’s reading. This interaction happens fairly early on in the public ministry of Jesus. So far he has called the disciples, cleansed a leper and healed a paralytic. And as a result people are starting to take notice of him. Mixed in with these miracles Jesus has also made a few pronouncements and preached in the synagogue, and some of his utterances have given a hint at who he is. And it is very likely that some of these hints of his being the Messiah is what has made people a bit uncomfortable. One of these controversial pronouncements comes right before this in a scene where Jesus in order to heal a paralytic man tells him that his sins are forgiven. This statement immediately incenses the Pharisees who say, “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” And today it appears that they are still thinking about it, but have found a way to no longer pay attention to what Jesus has said. The answer to their problems is that this Jesus guy is nothing more than a dining with sinners glutton who cannot even be bothered to fast. They have found a category into which they can place Jesus in order to not have to deal with him. No thinking needs to be adjusted and life can back to the way it was before. And discounting someone for non-sequitur type reasons is not just an issue Pharisees struggle with, we all love categories into which we can place people to make them easier to deal with. This is partly because our brains are essentially lazy and are constantly looking for shortcuts, but it is also because we do not like to change, especially when it comes to ourselves. If we can discount an uncomfortable idea by attacking the person who presented it then we don’t have to deal with that idea. The Pharisees today did not want to think about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah and the things that he was saying so they found a loophole by pointing out his dinner companions. But how often do we do the same thing? How often do we demonize others to make ourselves feel better or at least keep the status quo?

I read the writings of someone the other day who in the name of Christianity referred to President Trump as Satan. Not that he did something Satan-like, but that he was actually Satan. Now I really don’t care what your opinion is of our president, but the fact of the matter is he is not Satan. I mean for one thing Satan has better hair. But what this person did through making such an accusation was to make it so she never had to acknowledge anything worthwhile about Donald Trump. And sadly that is where our politics is these days. And please don’t think that I am saying that this is a one way street; I am sure I could find someone on the right who said the same thing about Nancy Pelosi. But when we go to such extremes to undercut people with whom we disagree we are doing something much worse we are refusing to believe that we are all created in the image of God. We are refusing to see another person as a sinner who has the same opportunity as us to be saved by Jesus Christ. That is the problem with the Pharisees today and with us when we refuse to see what God is doing. The Pharisees basically accused the Son of God of being some sort of sinning reprobate. When we so harden our hearts against others and discount anything they say we are essentially telling God who can and who cannot be saved.

Grading ourselves on a curve is easy, especially when all we have to do is tear down others. But the attitude that lies beneath it is a very dangerous one because it has the potential to call God’s good creation evil and to say that there are people who are beyond Christ’s saving grace. Christianity is hard partly because it says that we are all on the same team. That the faults that our neighbors possess are also faults that we possess. Christianity is ultimately about honesty, honesty about who God is and who we are. And in this honesty we cannot take short cuts, we cannot discount people because of one disagreeable action because if others cannot be saved we are going to be out of luck as well. For as St. Paul says, “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.”