

**Pentecost 20  
October 27, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all creation,  
The God alive in each of us s God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous:" Two men go up to the temple to pray. The first is a Pharisee, a religious insider who serves a vital leadership role in the spiritual life of his community. In the guise of a heartfelt "thank you," he makes a personal progress report to God: "I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers." He then humbly brags about his pious lifestyle: "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." Presumably, he leaves the temple feeling exactly the same way he felt when he walked in: just fine. No growth, no change.

The second man is a tax collector, a collaborator with the Roman Empire, and a traitor to his fellow Jews. This tax collector stands "far off," beats his chest, and refuses to raise his head towards heaven. He prays just one line: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Yet, Jesus concludes that it is the tax collector and not the Pharisee who goes home justified, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

On its face, this is a very simple parable. It feels silly to interpret it when its message is so obvious. But, here's the trap, expressed as a prayer I am sorely tempted to pray in response: "Lord, I thank you that I am nothing like the obnoxious caricature of a human being who is the Pharisee in your story. Thank you that I have arrived at a point in my faith journey where I am much more like the tax collector: self-aware, emotionally intelligent, mindful, cognizant, teachable, and especially humble.

But, before we jump to conclusions, we might consider what isn't said about the Pharisee and tax collector. For all we know the Pharisee went to the Temple in sincere gratitude. Remember, his life is devoted to being a faithful Jew. He is highly committed to his religious practices, and he truly feels that he is blessed by God for the way he lives his life. If you had asked him on his way out of the Temple what he thinks of the tax collector he would probably have said, "There but by the grace of God go I." He would probably think that he means it.

The parable also neglects to point out that the tax collector, after all his contrition, after all the beating of his breast and the shedding of tears, will not be quitting his job. He doesn't have a whole lot of options. It is a nasty business, but he is stuck with it. When he leaves the Temple he'll again take money from his neighbors, hand over some of it to the empire, and put some in his own pocket.

I think it is misleading to characterize the tax collector as honorable and the Pharisee as a judgmental hypocrite. It minimizes it to a dishonest morality tale and propels us straight to the place of saying, "God, we thank you that we are not like this Pharisee!" It is better to see the Pharisee for what he is ... a decent, generous, committed person. We must also recognize that the tax collector is both a victim of the system, as well as a contributor to its evil.

You see, the Pharisee's faithful commitment is laudable ... and it is people with that kind of faithful commitment upon whom we depend. It is easy to see those with that commitment paying the bills, visiting the sick, and feeding the hungry. To be honest, life in any church would be a lot easier if we had a church full of people with the same kind of commitment as this Pharisee ... people who care enough to fast, people who come to church every Sunday, people who give a full ten percent tithe of all their income. As in Jesus' day, it is people like the Pharisee who hold the community together and keep the faith with diligence and passion. I think it is a mistake to color the Pharisee sinister. He was a good person trying to do the right thing.

Is the prayer of the Pharisee really so bad? When we read between the lines of our own prayers we must realize that much is expressed in what is not said. Is it really so bad that we thank God for our blessings, even when those around us have less than us? Is it really that bad to give praise to God for health and happiness when others are sick and homeless? Where is the boundary between sincere gratitude balanced with compassion, and the feeling of entitlement and superiority?

There is one word in the Pharisee's prayer that is outside the Jewish form, and it gives him away. He doesn't give thanks that God has spared him from being a thief, rogue, adulterer, or tax collector ... instead, he gives thanks that he is not like them. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people ... "Oh, really?" The Pharisee crosses from the grammar of gratitude to the grammar of snobbery. It can be a very subtle line and we almost never notice it when we cross it, but I think we do it all the time. What betrays us is the unexamined refusal of kinship. It shows up every time we use us/them language. It keeps us from the empathy we would encounter if we recognized that deep in our souls we are all the same in God's eyes ... and if it can happen to others it can also happen to us.

You can feel the distance in the Pharisee's use of the word "this" as in "THIS tax collector." The Pharisee has stopped praying and started peeking. This isn't about him alone. It is about him in relationship to others. He measures himself against a neighbor and is pleased with the difference. Had the tax collector compared himself to the Pharisee and despaired at the difference, the tax collector's prayer would have been just as false. It is that looking around ... that competitive sideward glance that distorts the prayer.

The tax collector, wrong as he is about so much, has his eyes inward, not outward. He doesn't even notice the Pharisee. The tax collector is "standing far off," his eyes downward afraid to look up to heaven. His eyes were down to his heart, which he is beating with his fist ... fitting for a man at war with himself. Although both men pray about themselves, one is scanning the room, and the other is scanning his soul.

Of course, our capacity for our own smugness is astonishing. How many times do I hear, implicitly or explicitly, "Thank God I'm not like those climate change deniers?" Or, "I sure am glad I'm not like those fundamentalist." The worst is when I hear it coming out of my own mouth ... establishing an "us and them" mindset ... comparing myself to others ... usually with me being "right" and them being "wrong."

What Jesus exposes in this parable is the Pharisee's compulsive need to avoid his broken inner life by policing his outer boundaries instead ... deciding who is "in" and who is "out," based on his own narrow definitions of purity and piety. But honestly, are we much different? Ironically, as we compare ourselves to the Pharisee, and we look down on his arrogance, we implicitly exalt our humility. How dishonest and hypocritical is that?

Don't we behave sometimes as if we have arrived at our spiritual destination ... with nothing new to discover about how the Holy Spirit can alter our inner lives? Don't we set up religious, political, and socio-economic litmus tests for each other, based on personal inclinations and opinions that have nothing to do with taking Jesus seriously ... taking seriously Jesus's open-hearted love and hospitality? Don't we sometimes fixate on the outward forms of our lives so we can put on it display for others to applaud, instead of cultivating the secret and hidden life of God within our own souls?

This seemingly simple parable should give us pause. It is possible to do all manner of impressive moral and respectable things, and still walk away unjustified. It is possible to allow the outward forms of our lives to deaden us to God's Spirit. It is possible to pray without touching anything within us that matters. It is possible to practice an outwardly beautiful faith ... but one that is ashen, lifeless, and pointless in the eyes of God.

I believe we all have a bit of a Pharisee in us, and we all have a bit of the tax collector in us. All of us want to know that, like the tax collector, we can "go down to our home justified." And what does that mean? Are we justified in God's eyes? Or, are just justified in that place of being an authentic self. Either way, we want to be justified. So sometimes we play the Pharisee and set ourselves against the other ... being "right" when they are "wrong." We call upon an absentee authority such as the law, or rules, or policies, or the Bible, or God to make us "right" and righteous in opposition to the other who therefore must be "wrong."

Yet I believe it is the tax collector in us that knows the truth about our true self even when we are desperately trying to act so right and righteous. You see, it is when we are

unsure of ourselves that we are most likely to define who-we-want-to-be by who-we-are-not. When our eyes move away from our shadowy hearts, there is no place left to look but at someone else, and no comfort but in claiming, “Well, I’m not like that!”

I both love and find it maddening that Jesus doesn’t end his parable by saying, “The tax collector went forth and sinned no more.” In fact, we have no idea what the man does once he leaves the temple. We never find out if he gives up his dishonest profession, or returns the money he has unfairly taken from his neighbors, or ends up back in the temple a week later, just as full of remorse as he was before. In other words, we have no idea if he does anything to justify God’s lavish mercy towards him. And that is precisely the point. The lavish mercy of God cannot be earned. It can only be received. Confession is the opening up of our empty hands to receive the abundant blessing and mercy of God.

Two men go up to the temple to pray. One preens, the other weeps. One self-protects, the other surrenders. One catalogues, the other confesses. God hears both prayers. But only the honest and desperate prayer changes a life.

Amen.