

23rd Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Today we continue our journey through the many parables of the Gospel of Luke. We have met many characters and, perhaps, if we have been dutiful in paying attention, we have found a bit of ourselves in each of them. We have searched a house for a lost coin. We have traveled the hills for a lost sheep. We have listened to the relentless cries for mercy from a poor widow to an unjust judge. We have observed a manager squander his master's wealth and come out on top. We have returned to Jesus with a grateful former leper who expressed his thanksgiving to Jesus Christ for his being made well.

The parables of Luke's Gospel invite us to a deeper understanding of God's work in the world and how we are called to take part in it. Today's parable gives us two characters who are brought together by fate on the same day in the Temple. One is a Pharisee who has devoted his life to the law of God. We can presume he has spent countless hours studying the scriptures. He believes that he has the key to God's truth. But apparently he has missed something.

He stands and prays to God by listing all the people that he is thankful that he is not: thieves, rogues, adulterers, and the very tax-collector that stands next to him. I'm sure he could have listed many more categories of people he was glad not to be associated with, but he is too busy pivoting to his self-righteous behaviors. "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all of my income," he reminds God (as if God needed the reminder!).

Here, alone, the Pharisee stands. He has placed himself on quite the pedestal; a pedestal of self-righteousness that he has built up, brick by brick, by his piety. He probably thinks that if he does enough "good stuff" that he can add enough bricks to reach heaven and stand face-to-face with God. This pharisee believes he is well on his way to building his own personal "Tower of Babel" that will raise him to the status of the very God to whom he is praying. Apparently, his many hours of studying scripture have failed to remind him of what happened to the people who built that very tower. Their story does not end happily, rather it ends with a very painful dosage of humility.

Off to the side, the camera of this parable turns our gaze to a lowly tax-collector. He stands alone, not wanting to draw attention to himself. As a tax-collector, he knows he has little to gain from such an action. His profession leaves him with few friends, if indeed any at all. He makes his living collecting taxes for the Romans. Whatever over and above that amount that he squeezes from the pockets of the people is what he gets to keep for himself.

Whereas the Pharisee's prayer is a lengthy, detailed one, his prayer is a brief one; one that gets right down to the point. He does not point fingers at anyone but himself. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He beats his chest and looks to the ground, not even daring to look upon the heavens lest he catch eyes with the God who knows his heart.

At the end of the day, I believe that this parable is about knowing our place. It is about having honest and mature understanding of who we are in the eyes of God. You see, the pharisee in today's story spent so much time talking about all the people he claimed not to be that he failed to see himself for what he really was, a person so blinded by his own self-righteous behavior that he ignored his own need for mercy. The pharisee thought that his fasting and his tithing shielded him from needing mercy. In fact, he wasn't really thanking God for anything that God had given him. Instead, the pharisee chooses to thank God for the works that he felt he had achieved for himself.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, had a much more accurate understanding of himself. Cowering in a corner, he wastes no time or energy convincing himself that he is anything more than a sinner like everyone else, a sinner in desperate need of mercy and redemption. After ending the parable, Jesus tells us that this man is already heading in the right direction. In fact, he went home justified unlike his pious colleague, the self-absorbed pharisee. In conclusion, Jesus leaves us with these prophetic words, "for all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The Church, of all places, should be a community of the most humble people. The Church, of all places, should be where people are welcomed into a family where each and every member understands her or his need for God's mercy. However, we, the Church, have not always done the best job of living into this identity. Many people have become disillusioned with the Church because they find it to be a place with too many self-righteous pharisees and not enough penitent tax-collectors.

We can choose to pray like the pharisee, and list off with arrogant thanksgiving that we are not like "those people." But God has heard far too many of those "prayers." And more of those prayers than I care to admit have come from my mouth, if I am to be completely honest. What this parable challenges me to do, and I hope it challenges you as well, is to stand in the corner with the tax-collector and join him in acknowledging that none of us is free from our deep need of God's mercy.

You see, when we convince ourselves that our deeds secure our salvation, we are keeping ourselves from hearing the Gospel message and receiving its joy. This truth reminds me of the words of a hymn by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette¹ that goes like this:

A Pharisee was praying; he proudly stood alone:
"God, thank you that I'm better than others I have known."
He saw the faults of others, yet in that holy place,
He missed the joy and wonder of God's amazing grace.

Far off in that same Temple, a tax collector stood.
He knew he was a sinner; he knew that God is good.
"Have mercy, God, upon me!" the tax collector cried.
He left that place of worship forgiven, justified.

O God of love, forgive us when we look all around

¹http://www.carolynshymns.com/a_pharisee_was_praying.html

And think that, by our actions, we stand on solid ground:
We pray, "See how we serve you! We work and volunteer!
Aren't we the ones whose giving builds up your kingdom here?"

May we, your church, be humble in serving you each day,
For pride will never help us to walk your kingdom-way.
May we know your forgiveness — our need for mercy, too —
That, loved and loving others, our life may be in you.

I love this hymn because it reminds me of a few truths regarding today's parable.

First of all, it reminds me that the Pharisee missed out of a lot. He missed out on the joy of receiving God's grace because he had convinced himself foolishly that he was not in need of it.

Secondly, this hymn reminds me that we are often guilty of holding our deeds as a "savings account" that will bail us out when we stumble. However, when we stumble, and stumble we most certainly do, we are not saved by ourselves but by the steadfast love and mercy of God.

Thirdly, this hymn reminds me that, as it says, "pride will never help us walk God's kingdom way."

Today is the second Sunday of our annual stewardship campaign. Together, we are collecting our pledges for 2017 in order that the mission and ministries of the people who are Shelter Island Presbyterian Church may be supported and continued in the coming year. Our giving of our financial resources is a joyful acknowledgment of God's blessing in our lives.

Yes, the pharisee in today's story tithed ten percent of his income. This was a fact that he took great care to remind God about. However, that financial giving was not done in joy. Instead, it came from a place of self-righteous piety. The pharisee gave money because it made him feel better about himself, which was a clever way of keeping the attention focused on him rather than the blessings of God that made such a gift possible in the first place.

On a personal note, I am still learning to give money with a joyful and generous heart. If I am not careful, I can get to a place where I feel that the money I pledge to this congregation is something that I have done out of the goodness of my heart. After all, I work hard for the money I have. I have dedicated many years of my life preparing for this profession and my blood, sweat, and tears have gone into earning it. Therefore, the "pharisee" inside of me can sneak to the surface and give me a little self-righteous pat on the back when I submit my pledge for next year's budget.

But then, today's parable reminds me that I am just as guilty as the pharisee of building up my own self-righteous "Tower of Babel" pedestal. Today's passage reminds me that the work that I put into earning "my" money took the breath in my lungs that is a gift from God. The very life that I have is not something that I created for myself, rather it is a gift from God. The fact that I was able to have an education and become a pastor was because I was supported constantly by a loving and caring family, which, too, is a gift from God. Anything we do, every dollar we give, every joy we feel, every blessing in our lives, is a gift from God. Theologically speaking, we did not "earn" it, we have received it through the mercy of God and it is our calling to share it joyfully to build up God's kingdom as disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the world we live it makes it all too easy to forget that truth. We live in a capitalist society whose rationale is based off of the notion that the incentive for self-advancement is the single most

powerful tool in securing a strong economy. I believe that capitalism works best when we hold that truth in tension with another truth that reminds us that some people have to work much harder in order to achieve the same result.

That being said, as Christians in a capitalist nation, we must be careful not to let our capitalism negatively affect our theological understand of God's grace. We pledge money not because we have earned it, but because our financial resources are, themselves, made possible through God's mercy. We should not pledge money because it makes us feel better because we "sacrifice" by relinquishing a portion of hard-earned money. The only sacrifice that needs to be celebrated is not any sacrifice on our part but the sacrifice of God's son, Jesus Christ, who died and rose from the grave to save all of us sinners, pharisees and tax-collectors alike!

So friends, I hope you will join me in the corner with the tax-collector. It may be an uncomfortable place to be, but together we can learn from his honesty and his humble understanding of his place in the world. Together, we are all sinners in need of redemption. We are all thirsty for God's grace. And the good news of the gospel is that God's redemption and grace have been promised to us. Together, let us joyfully and generously give because we are members of a family that has been created, redeemed, and sustained through no merit of our own but by the relentless mercy of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.