

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
Luke 18:9-14  
August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013

In 1961 humanism was recognized by the Supreme Court of the United States of America as a religion. Since that time cults of all kinds have multiplied in this country. Humanism is defined by Webster as, “a philosophy which asserts the dignity and worth of man, and his capacity for self-realization through reason, often rejecting the supernatural.” In other words, humanism says in effect, “God, we really don’t need you anymore. You see, we have learned to manipulate the atom, the sciences continue to advance, we can send men into space and reach the planets. Men like author and bio-psychologist Nigel Barber say that by the year 2041 religion will become irrelevant because faith is just a way to control uncertainty.

It’s easy to understand why such conclusions are drawn when man becomes the center of the universe. Humanism teaches that we draw on inner strengths and powers to solve problems and meet the challenges of life. And though it’s only been since 1961 that such a way of thinking has been called “officially” a religion, these types of ideas have been around for much longer. For example... our Gospel text for today.

You see, humanism, just like so many false religions, has its roots in self-pride. Listen to the prayer of the Pharisee: “*God, I thank you that I’m not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.*” In two short sentences, this Pharisee in the parable says the word “I” five times. The word, “God” is used only once. This is not only a commentary on religious self-pride like men who think themselves better because they are closer to God – or they keep God’s law better—or because they pray more and read the Bible more... but also on the self-pride we see today with those who believe they need no help from God – or Don’t think they need God for anything. They don’t invoke God for strength, praise or thanksgiving when things are going so well – but love to blame God when things are going so bad. We, along with the world, love to take credit when things are “honky dory” and blame others when they stink.

The Pharisee made the mistake of comparing himself with the worst of humanity – extortioners, unjust, adulterers. The same kind of measuring stick is used today by many... and by comparison to the news headlines – a football playing murderer and a man who kept three women captive as slaves in his house for years – we are pretty good people. The Pharisee thought himself everything that God would expect a person to be... and even more. But even when we don’t think of ourselves that way, we are still prone to think, “at least I’m better than most.” This is how we stand with the Pharisee in the text. In these times, and they are prevalent for us if we are honest, we are the Pharisee Jesus is talking about.

However, if we look into the mirror of perfection, “*Be ye holy, as I am holy!*” “*Be perfect, as I am perfect!*” we will be moved to lament with the apostle Paul, “*O wretched man that I am; who shall deliver me from the body of this death.*” And like St. Paul, we will be led to call ourselves the “chief of sinners.” We are sinners who live in a “sin-filled” world. And when the law of God does its work on our heart – showing us what we can be like and what we have done – we, then, can resonate with the tax collector.

You see, not only do we live in a world that sees sin all around, we live in a world that has been devastated by sin. Because of sin, this world is fallen. Because it is fallen, many bad

things happen that we don't expect. We didn't even do anything and bad stuff happens. We had nothing to do with it and bad stuff happens. And we don't know why.

Two weeks ago I was in Greensburg, Kansas at Divine Service with 14 (yes I counted them – it wasn't too hard) other children of God worshipping at a small church. This church building was four years old. Now, most of you can recall why a Lutheran Church that has been in Greensburg for more than fifty years would only have a building that is four years old. You remember – the devastating tornado that leveled 95% of the town back in May of 2007. They had a picture of what the church looked like right after the tornado in their narthex. The pews were twisted and sitting on top of each other. Insulation from the walls was all over the place. And, of course, you see the stripped trees behind the church without problem because the walls were gone.

There was also something else in the picture. Right in the middle of the wreckage was an altar. Someone had put a podium next to it and a little table for a couple of candles. They had church that day the picture was taken. They had it at their church – destroyed as it was. They had church without church walls and pews and hymnals. They had church that day and the Lord joined them there. He was there – in the wreckage of their lives in Greensburg, Kansas.

I thought that to be a revealing and explicit commentary on the life of the Christian. We approach the Lord with a world around us that is blown to bits. My health stinks, the bills are piling up, my job stinks, the kids are giving me such grief, my life stinks... and yet in it all, our Lord meets us in that wreckage. He meets us where we are at. When life is blown to bits our Lord says, "*Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.*" Jesus stand with us and we can confidently say as it says in Hebrews, "*The Lord is my help; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*"

We know what man can do. Man can hurt, maim and kill. Man can break your spirit and break your heart. All of this has happened to you. But not for long. Our Jesus "*was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities*" (Isaiah 53). Man's hurting and killing could only break Him for a short time. Jesus' life endures forever. He endures for you.

So when you are the Pharisee, even to a small degree, stop boasting in yourself with prideful exuberance and realize where you stand before God's requirements of you. When you are the tax collector who sees how far off the mark he is, pray to the Lord of enduring life, that He will forgive you of all of your sins. Stand before the Lord as a beggar, asking for what you do not deserve.

And we have it. We rejoice because we have it. His death means our forgiveness of sins. We go home, just like the tax collector, justified. We are made "just." We are made forgiven children of God because our Jesus would allow Himself to be broken on the cross. We know what we have because our Jesus didn't stand before His Heavenly Father and say, "look at them, dear Father. How can I save these poor miserable sinners? They will never be righteous. They will never be your children." Instead, Jesus identifies Himself with the man who can't even look up at God. That's who Jesus comes along side of today giving strength and glory. That's you. Thank God we don't have a Pharisee Jesus but rather a tax collector Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.