

Sermon for Trinity 11 - Luke 18:9-14

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Tax collectors were evil people in the Roman world. They were not mid-level, government bureaucrats trying to do their jobs. They were not like modern IRS federal employees in the US.

They had betrayed their own people. They had betrayed their own people so that they could fleece them. They were mercenaries. A tax collector was like a drug dealer getting fabulously rich by going into high school parking lots and selling cocaine and heroin to teenagers. The point is that this tax collector in the parable had done some truly vile things and he had earned the Pharisee's disgust and anger.

So the problem with the Pharisee was that he looked at the tax collector and saw him according to his sins but not according to his need. He forgot that the purpose of the Temple was to cleanse sinners. He forgot that the purpose of the temple was to restore men to God's mercy. The Lord desires that all, even drug dealers, pornographers, and terrorists, would come to repentance and receive the salvation that He has won for them. The Pharisee had forgotten this. He thought that he deserved to be there because his outward righteousness was an indication of God's favor.

This damned the Pharisee. He went home condemned. And this parable is a warning to us. The irony in this is that we don't realize how quick we are to judge and dismiss the Pharisee as he was to judge and dismiss the tax collector. We see him as self-righteous and elitist. That runs up hard against everything we think we are.

But we should be sympathetic to the Pharisee. Imagine how you'd feel if you had to face the man who'd beat you up, who had humiliated you at work, or had taken most of your hard-earned money so he could "live it up." We don't know what the Pharisee was going through, but we know he was hurting, we know that he'd had his heart broken, we know that he'd been betrayed, we know that he'd been slandered, we know that he'd been afraid, we know that he'd felt shame and guilt and regret. How do we know? Because the Bible says: "Nothing has befallen you that is not common to man."

Knowing this, we could, and we ought to, look at one another with a great deal more pity than we do. There are women here who are secretly grieving for miscarriages. They don't want to air it publically, but they are hurting. Is it any surprise then if they are just a bit short with you? There are men here who are struggling with addictions and haven't told anyone. Is it really that terrible if they don't notice you and smile at you and act like you are a long lost friend? There are people here with mental illnesses, people who are still dealing with the abuse they suffered as children, who have terrible regrets and nightmares, who are lonely, who are depressed, who are afraid. You see: in this, we

are all the same. Nothing has befallen you that is not common to man. That means that not only are we not worse than other people, more screwed up, less worthy, but it also means we aren't any better. The sympathy that we would have from others is what we owe to them. From time to time we all behave badly. We would all like a little understanding and sympathy and an occasional pass without human judging.

Sorrow and pain doesn't justify bad behavior. It doesn't. Yet we would all like to have the world be a little kinder to our daughters the day after their husbands walk out on them. We could start with ourselves. Instead of being annoyed or becoming angry because someone is rude to us, or cuts us off in traffic, or we get disgusted because someone is unkempt or smells a bit, we might allow ourselves to be moved to pity; we might allow ourselves to be moved to kindness. In other words, we might just do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

The Pharisee acted horribly. He was self-righteous. He didn't ask God for mercy. He didn't think he needed it. He went home condemned. But there is also a positive example in the parable. There is the tax collector. He was sorry for his sins. He was humble before God and man. He confessed and asked for mercy. He went home justified even though he was a scoundrel.

But you don't have to be a public scoundrel to need forgiveness. You can be a private scoundrel. You can have secret sins and horrible thoughts and you can even be self-righteous like the Pharisee to need forgiveness.

And thank God that He is always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than either we desire or deserve. He is in fact eager to forgive, abundant in His mercy, loving of both tax collectors with shameful pasts and the proud tithing church goers with secret sins. Christ died for your sins in accordance with the Scriptures. He was buried. He rose again for your justification in accordance with the Scriptures on the third day. And this day He absolves you, restores you, and feeds you. He sends you home justified - not made perfect, not without a memory of the past, not yet free from temptation - but justified, declared righteous for Christ's sake, accepted and loved by God. By the grace of God, we are who we are, and that grace toward us is not in vain.

This is, in fact, the essence of our religion and this is, in fact, the chief attribute of our God: His mercy endures forever. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠