

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday Oct. 27, 2019 Proper 25C
Text: Luke 18:9-14
In Whom do we trust?

Luke's parable contrasts two ways of praying and more importantly two postures toward the spiritual life.

We know that the Pharisees get a lot of bad press in the New Testament and this story is no exception. The Pharisee's posture at prayer is proud and boastful. The Pharisee stands by himself an isolated example of excellence. It appears that he is praying but in reality, much of his prayer is an exercise in self-congratulation and self-promotion instead of indebtedness to God.

It really is an amazing prayer, I mean he is thankful, truly thankful that he is superior to almost everyone, grateful that God made him just the way he is, the best. On the other hand, the Pharisee's prayer is a rather odd prayer. While prayer is normally understood as a conversation with God, the Pharisee seems to be mostly talking to himself. God, I thank you that I am not like other people, that I fast twice a week and that I give a tenth of my income. I, I, I, He is the center of his own prayer. His prayer is basically, "Lord, I thank you for me."

It is clear that the Pharisee is a religious over-achiever. He compliments himself on his over the top perfection. He is zealous in his spiritual practices and this makes him special and separates him from the riff raff.

As one commentator said, "For the Pharisee the real action is between him and the tax collector. God, the focus of all genuine prayer, has receded completely into the background.

The tax collector is a very different sort. Whatever the Pharisee is, he is not. He makes no claim to his own personal righteousness. He stands humbly by himself at a distance. He bows in reverence and beats his breast in repentance. He empties himself. He has made a great many mistakes, broken the sacred laws. His prayer is simply a request for mercy, nothing but mercy. "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Jesus offers an interpretation of the story.

“I tell you this man (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

It is not exactly how conventional religiosity would evaluate the situation. I mean the Pharisees were very devout people who felt that religion was not just a bunch of pious words. Religion is about how you live your life, how you conduct your affairs according to the practices of your faith. The Pharisee is a model citizen in a lot of ways.

His prayer could be translated into modern parlance as, “God I attend church regularly and one that is fairly open minded. I’m on the vestry and several other important committees. I do my part for the poor by helping Habitat for Humanity and working at the food pantry. I donate blood regularly at the clinic and I tithe to my church (which really makes the rector happy and enables them to do so much ministry) and I give more than that away to good causes. Thank Jesus for making me good and successful and just the way I am.

However, Jesus’ evaluation is that the tax collector goes down from the temple justified but the good church-going, tither is unworthy! This is a tougher passage than we had imagined.

In printer’s language to “justify” means to set type in such a way that all full lines are of equal length and flush both left and right; in other words, to put the printed lines in the right relationship with the page they’re printed on and with each other. The religious sense of the word is very close to the same. Being justified means being brought into right relation with God. Paul says simply that being justified means having peace with God (Rom. 5:1). The Apostle Paul uses the word “Justification” for the first step in the process of salvation.

So, Jesus says that of the two men praying in the temple the one who is the biggest loser is actually the one who is right with God. The tax collector who works for the dirty rotten violent Romans extracting taxes from his own people and most likely skimming some off the top for himself is the one who find mercy from God.

Jesus is basically saying, “You people are missing the point of what the kingdom of God is all about.” The way of God’s Kingdom begins with a posture of trust and dependence upon God. The tax collector knew who he was, he knew and admitted to the truth about himself.

Sometimes I feel like the contemporary image of the tax collector's prayer might be someone in an AA group. They don't have any illusions about themselves. They use straightforward talk and are fierce about honesty. They are reflective people and know who they are and what their true weaknesses are. They know that they cannot do it on their own, that they need help.

God is not trying to just make us good; he's trying to make us truthful – and being truthful is a deep goodness. It is not ok for our definition or understanding of goodness to be largely covering up unpleasant parts of us so that others cannot see them. Jesus is reminding us of our dependence upon God. He is telling us that the real spiritual path is built on humility and honesty which lead to acknowledging and knowing our need of God our deep-down dependence on God for everything. As one theologian said, God has not called us to success it seems; God has called us to surrender.

One important part of interpreting scripture is to consider carefully where you are in the story. What character best describes you? Who is the good example in the story? If we are going to let scripture influence and change us, it is a good idea to put ourselves into the story.

Some of you know that I grew up in a very devout and religious home. I went to church on Sunday morning and Sunday night and on Wednesday night. We never missed church and went even when on vacation. I was required to tithe off of my allowance, my paper route money, my lawn mowing money, my car washing money and any other money I received including birthday cash. It was a strict home with a good many rules and extremely high expectations of my behavior and comportment. As a child, I was expected to memorize a great deal of scripture each year and to live as honestly and blamelessly as possible. Holiness of life was no joke in my family. Needless to say, I grew up being a rule follower of the highest order. It meant I didn't get into much trouble, was a model citizen, worked hard, did my homework, contributed wherever I was, helped others and generally was a pretty good kid. I did not drink alcohol until my 21st birthday. I don't think there was anything particularly wrong with my conservative upbringing, in fact, in most ways it worked out pretty well and kept me safe and industrious. The only real problem with it was that I thought pretty highly of myself and had a good deal of personal arrogance and pride in my spiritual superiority. I was a good kid, I knew God loved me and I knew it because I was successful and I had the hardware to prove it, class valedictorian, editor of the newspaper, captain of the football team and wrestling team, student body president, and on and on the accolades rolled. The way I lived and what I had been taught in my religious upbringing made me think that I was special and that I

had in fact earned my salvation by being good and that I was especially blessed by God and that I deserved it all. There were of course cracks in the armor and failings that I chose not to notice or reflect on much. I was still a very human teenager, bending the rules to breaking and once in a while doing things that I look back on as awful and hurtful and damaging to others.

I wasn't a Pharisee but I probably could have passed for one. I was privileged, gifted, rewarded and blessed and I think I felt that it was mostly all my own doing. Grace was not an important part of my spiritual vocabulary though I'm sure I could have quoted you a definition – "unmerited favor." Looking back on that period of my life it is far easier to relate to the Pharisee in this parable. I was a religious insider – jaded and self-satisfied. Salvation was basically something that I had earned myself and God owed it to me because I was so good and disciplined and awesome. Spiritual pride takes a while to undermine but fortunately life has a way of knocking us around and offering us the opportunity to become more self-aware and reflective.

When I left home for college, I had no idea what kind of humbling experience that would be and how it would alter my spiritual understanding so deeply. I became isolated, lonely and depressed pretty quickly due to some significant trouble in my family. I was fortunate in that I found a friend and mentor in my InterVarsity staff worker on my campus. This godly man Clyde Ohta saw some potential in me and decided to invest in me as a person. So, throughout my college days Clyde and I would play racquetball every week and then we would go out for lunch. At lunch we would talk about anything and everything but one of Clyde's favorite conversations was about grace. We studied scripture together, talked about the Christian life, argued our positions and he bought my lunch every week. One of the themes that continued to come up was where we found our value, from our accomplishments and our doing or were we worthy and valuable to God just because we were human and God's beloved creatures. Was God's love bigger than our mistakes and failures? Was I loved and accepted by God just the way I was or did I need to clean up my act a bit more before God was going to truly, deeply, madly love me?

I don't know exactly when it happened but slowly as a result of all those conversations, all that investment of time, all those free lunches and the incredible struggles that life seems to offer each of us, I began to see the world through a lens that was more about grace than about my own efforts and striving for acceptance. I began to see that the life I had was actually a gift from God and that so much of it was not of my own making but sheer gift. I began to see the ugliness in my life and attitudes and behavior even though I looked pretty good from the outside. I began to see that there was so much work to be done on the inside, so much pain in me and

so much judgment of others. I began to soften a bit, to major more on grace than rigor. I began to be able to forgive myself a little and that allowed me to forgive others more often. It was for me a kind of conversion, a Damascus Road that occurred over time. It is a strange thing the movement from arrogance and superiority to a more human understanding a more gentle and honest way of being in the world. I'm grateful for those many conversations from that wise and gentle man, I'm grateful for all of those free lunches that taught me that there is in fact free lunch, it is life itself. Life itself is the free gift of God and so is God's wild and unflinching love poured out toward us.

To be honest, I've still got a long way to go to know the depth of God's love and to feel it, to really feel it in my bones. I still want to earn my keep in the kingdom. I still want to make sure that I'm worth God's love. I still want to hedge my bets just to make sure that I'm covered if grace is not really free.

Remember that parables are meant to subvert how we see things so that we might see through the eyes of God, that is, receive the gift of faith. I think that stories like the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector are stories meant to get us thinking about where we are in the grand story of God's Grace, God's crazy unmerited love for each us. I think that we don't so much read these stories as these stories read us. I don't really think that there is a right or a wrong person in this story just two people in need of God's wild love and grace. I think that the story invites each of us to take stock of our own spiritual posture, to find ourselves in this story and become open to what God desires for us. To realize that God desires us and desires us right where we are, we don't have to clean up first.

The story is about getting right with God, justified. It is about being in right relationship to God, to others and to our self. The truth is that conversion of our inner person never really ends. It is a life-long process; an unending adventure right within our own personhood before God. Conversion is epic for each of us. As the famous theologian and preacher Martin Luther reminded, "humans need to experience three conversions: a conversion of their hearts, of their minds and of their wallets. All that we have and all that we are is meant to be used in service to God.

There is really one thing that is important, growing into an ever deepening and loving relationship with God. We do that by learning to tell the truth about ourselves and in doing so discover our deep need of grace and God's deeper desire to give us that grace. We do this by realizing that everything we have is a gift from God. And in putting our resources, gifts, talents and money in the service of God we make a step

toward growing in our relationship with God. In sharing generously with others and for God's work in the world, from what we have been given by God, we grow in the life of faith.

The Gospel truth is this, that no matter who you are or what you've done, God wants you on his side. There is nothing you have to do or be. It's on the house. It comes with the territory. God has "justified you," lined you up, made you right with God. To grasp this just a little bit, to feel it in your bones, to smile at the wonder of it, to treasure it in your heart is the first step on the adventure of faith.

"God be merciful to me, a sinner!"