

Pentecost 20 Proper 25 – Year C – Track 2 - 10-27-2019

“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.’”

We have attached some very negative connotations to the word “Pharisee.” Certainly, the gospels are full of some rather harsh encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees clung to observance of the law as the way to being “right” with God – and Jesus spent his time trying to spread the good news that God’s love surrounds us no matter how observant or unobservant we are. When Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees, it is most often about their vision of who God is, and how we are to relate to God.

To give him his dues, the Pharisee in our Gospel parable today is doing all the right things. He goes to the temple to pray, he goes beyond the requirements of the law and fasts *twice* each week. His pledge is up to date and is very generous. He is the kind of person we would like to have as a member of the congregation, perhaps.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was not right with God at all, at least in the eyes of those around him. Tax collectors were collaborators. They were under contract with the Romans to collect money from their fellow Jews. They had to turn in a certain amount to Rome, but anything they collected above that was theirs to keep. They were aiding in the economic oppression of their own people.

So when Jesus tells this parable about a Pharisee following the Law, which was supposed to be pleasing to God, and a tax collector who is making his living by exploiting others, the ending is another of those “upside down” punch lines we find so often in the gospel of Luke. The exalted will be humbled, and the humbled will be exalted.

It is a fairly clear message, not complicated in the least. Ah, but there is a rub. As soon as we say, “We get the lesson. We need to be humble like the tax collector, and not proud like the Pharisee!” – we are only a step away from saying, “Oh God, thank you that I am not like the Pharisees!” And then we are back at square one.

Perhaps what we are really being cautioned about in this parable is our penchant for comparison. The Pharisee is very busy comparing himself against others – he's not like – let's be honest – he is *better* than other people. And he's also busy comparing himself against the Law – using the law as a measuring stick and noting how well he measures up. He can check off all the boxes in the “righteousness” column.

But the tax collector makes no comparisons. He says only, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” No talk of anyone else. No one better, no one worse. He brings himself into the presence of God, asking for mercy. He does not try to prove anything to God or to himself or to anyone else. He does not even say that he intends to change his life. He simply comes into the presence of God as he is. And Jesus calls him humble.

The word “humility” comes from the same root as Humus – earth. Humility, then, is knowing where we come from. We come from the earth. And like the earth, we come from God. We *all* come from the earth. In that, we are all equal. The Pharisee is not better or worse than the tax collector. And that is a harsh lesson if we really hear it.

We are all about comparison. Our way of doing things is better than the way they do it somewhere else. My political views are better. America is the greatest country, not like those *other* places. - But Jesus says, “Focus on God, look at where you come from, because that is all that really matters.”

We heard in the first reading from Sirach, “Do not offer God a bribe, for he will not accept it and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice.” The Pharisee was essentially offering God a bribe – as are we all, when we think that we can get ourselves into the kingdom of God by our observances, by what we do or don't do. The Pharisee – like we do – relies on a “dishonest sacrifice” when he gives from his excess and not from his heart.

How do we remedy all this? How do we work at being humble, without then becoming proud again of how humble we are? We remember from whence we come. We come from the earth. God's earth. We *all* come from the earth. Brown, white, yellow, red, black – we all come from God's earth. Pharisees and Publicans and RE-publicans and Democrats; Muslims and Christians and Jews and Sikhs; those with PhDs and those who never finished 3rd grade; those who paid for this church to be built and those who have never come through its doors. We all come from God's earth. And in the presence of God, no one is better or worse. We are only what we are – children of God dependent on God's mercy.

And here is the final “rub” for me in reflecting on this parable. I mused last week that perhaps God is the widow asking us, the unjust judge, to deliver mercy. I think if we really allow this parable to change us, if we wrestle with it until our bones are out of joint, we may find that the tax collector’s prayer for mercy is laid at our door as well. Can I hear, from those I look down on, a prayer for mercy? Am I willing to grant mercy to those with whom I disagree vehemently? Am I willing to be merciful to those I find to be sinners, whether or not they make any moves to change their behavior? --- Those are hard questions for me. I need to wrestle with what the questions even mean. But the questions are still there.

God, be merciful to me, a sinner. And give me the grace to be merciful to others.

Amen.

[Sirach 35:12-17](#)

[Psalm 84:1-6](#)

[2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18](#)

[Luke 18:9-14](#)