

Sermon, Trinity 11, 2019
Gospel, St. Luke 18: 9-14

In this morning's Gospel reading Jesus presents us with a parable about the prayers of two men in the Temple, It's different from other parables, in that it doesn't tell a story that points us, through metaphor, to a greater truth, as with the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son, all which point us to God's joy at the return of a child of God to His family of faith. This one sounds more like something that Jesus might have actually witnessed, as He did with widow giving her mite in the Temple.

This parable is about the difference between the prayer of unbelief and the prayer of faith, about confession and absolution, about repentance and forgiveness, about pride and humility before a merciful God.

It is a wonderfully brief, but vivid depiction of a scene at the temple in Jerusalem with two very different characters. The first character is a Pharisee. Now, the Pharisees were a group of Jewish people that arose after the return from the exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C. The returning exiled children of Israel recognized that they had been chastised by God for their pagan worship and their disregard of God's covenant with them. The Pharisees wished to avoid angering God again. So they devoted themselves to holy living, observing the Ten Commandments and the ritual law, plus the oral traditions, which, they taught, had been given to Moses, and passed down from generation to generation, laws such as requiring the sprinkling of household furniture before meals, ritual handwashing, and limiting the distance one could walk on the Sabbath. They were so diligent to avoid breaking the second commandment--misusing the name of the Lord--, Yahweh-- that they ceased saying it aloud when Holy Scripture was read in worship. In place of "Yahweh", they would say "the LORD". That tradition was carried over into the Greek, Latin and English translations of the Hebrew Bible, so that now, whenever you see "the LORD" in the Old Testament spelled with all capital letters, the Hebrew says, "Yahweh."

The Pharisees wanted to please God by following His law as best as they could. They were good neighbors. They were the kind of people you would want for your next door neighbors. They would never let their dog run loose, if they owned dogs. They would watch your house when you were away. They were good citizens, obeying the civil laws, paying taxes, supporting the synagogue and temple with a tenth of their income in everything, money, produce, herbs. They fasted twice a week, even though it was not required. They feared God. They were pillars of society, and admired by the people.

On the other hand, the tax-collectors, or publicans, as the King James version calls them, were among the most despised of society, lumped in with thieves and adulterers, considered traitors to their people. They were men, often fellow Jews, who

had obtained costly licenses from the Romans in order to collect taxes and fees from their fellow countrymen for the expenses of the Roman overseers. The Romans allowed them to charge the people a fee for their services, but the tax collectors often went beyond the lawful fee, and cheated their people by charging more. They were looked upon as scum.

In our parable, a Pharisee and a tax collector both come to the Temple to pray to God, but, as Jesus tells us, only the tax collector went down from the Temple that day justified, that is forgiven, counted as righteous in God's eyes.

Why not the Pharisee, too? Didn't he thank God? Yes, he did. He thanked God for making him a better person than everyone around him--"other men"--better than adulterers and thieves, of course, but a world better than that tax collector standing at the back. The Pharisee's way of thanking didn't exalt God but himself. He presented His good works as evidence of how good he was, displaying them before God for His approval. He didn't ask for mercy. He didn't really need it, after all. Where was his transgression that needed forgiveness? Where was his iniquity that required mercy? The Pharisee recounted his good works before God, content that for them He would be accounted righteous in God's eyes, justified. No need to repent. In fact, He didn't really need God to justify him, for he had done that already for himself. "Look at me God. If anyone deserves heaven, I do!"

Then we see the tax collector, head down in an attitude of penitence and reverence, hitting his chest with his fist, as if punishing himself for his sinful heart. He has nothing to present to God except one thing--God's own promise to be merciful to all who trust in Him--the promise of reconciliation through faith in God and His promised Messiah:

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. (Psalm 32: 5, ESV)*

from Psalm 32. He believes that God is a merciful God and hears the voice of those who call out to him in faith in their time of need. He knows from God's Law that he deserves God's temporal and eternal punishment. He feels in his conscience, his heart, his sin. Therefore He comes to the place of God's mercy seat, sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice. He comes to the house of the Lord crying out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

In this cry, the tax collector offers his own sacrifice of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving to God. He prays to God for mercy, forgiveness for his sins of thought, word, and deed, for what he has done, and what he has left undone. He praises God by acknowledging His mercy, His steadfast love that endures forever. He gives thanks to God for the gift of repentance, that has led him to confess his sins so that God may forgive him. He holds out empty hands, so that God would fill them with His gifts. He

goes home justified, righteous in God's eyes, forgiven, saved, a true child of Israel, a child of God.

But God rejects the Pharisee's false prayer of praise for himself, his self-righteousness, his self-justification. As in the story of Cain and Abel, where God looked upon the sacrifice of Abel with favor, because it was made in faith, as the author of Hebrews tells us, and rejects Cain's offering without faith, so here God regards the offering of faith of the humble tax collector, and rejects the faithless sacrifice of the proud Pharisee.

The tax collector knows God is merciful because the Holy Spirit had created faith in him through the hearing of God's Word of promise of a Messiah, a Savior to rescue humanity from its slavery to sin and death. As with Abraham, all who believe this promise are accounted righteous, are justified by God, not because of works, but because of the faith which trusts God's promises-- from Adam and Eve, Abel, Seth, Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, Ruth, David, and all the saints of the Old Testament.

You and I, who live in these last days, have seen the revealing of God's Savior in Jesus Christ, who took on our flesh, fulfilled the Law perfectly, and died for our sins, so that all who trust in Him would not be put to shame, but would be justified, forgiven, saved, and given eternal life. Jesus has taken our sins and given us His righteousness. He has taken our sentence of death and given us His new, resurrection life. Martin Luther called this the "blessed exchange". All of this we receive by grace, as gift, so that none may boast in their works.

Of course, good works are... good. God demands them in His Law, His Ten Commandments, His will for our lives. He expects us, His saved children to do good works, to walk in His ways, to live holy lives. He also knows the world, the devil, and our own sinful, proud flesh will tempt us to hold up our good works before Him, as the Pharisee did in the parable, as works meriting heaven. Or, for those who feel their sin, but doubt His mercy, God knows they can fall into despair.

So the Lord gives us a place to combat both pride and despair, the two sides of the coin of unbelief. He gives us a place to come and bow our heads with our brothers and sisters, lay our pride aside and confess with the tax collector, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He gives us a place where we can hear these comforting words, "In the stead, and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." He gives us a place to sing a psalm of praise, the Introit, as we enter spiritually and bodily into His Holy Temple. He gives us a place to hear His Word of Law and Gospel in the readings of Holy Scripture, delivering His holiness and His mercy to us. He gives us a place where we can pray together the prayer He taught us, in which we plead, "forgive us our trespasses", trusting that "a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." (Psalm 51: 17, ESV). He gives us a place where we may grow in faith and knowledge of the truth so that we may

face both life and death with the godly confidence that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38, ESV)

God calls, gathers, enlightens and equips us by the Holy Spirit to lead faithful, holy lives, but forbids us to hold up our lives to Him as deserving of heaven, except in His Son Jesus. Jesus earned heaven for us already, by His sinless life, and by His holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death, two thousand years ago. All that remains for us is to cry out in expectant faith, “Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us.”, to receive His gifts of Word and Sacrament, and to go down to our houses justified-forgiven. In Jesus’ + name. Amen.