

Pentecost 23 – October 23, 2016

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector Pray

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22

Psalms 84:1-7

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

Christ the King Lutheran Church, Tigard, OR

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Fellow ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
Gracia y paz de Dios, Padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo.
Grace and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Vacations in my birth family were epic!
Mom spent days constructing 9 piles of clothing, one pile for each family member.
Play clothes, church clothes, visiting the relatives clothes.
Socks, underwear, jammies, everything neatly sorted.
She spent hours carefully filling open top boxes with food, utensils and toys.
Dad collected the camping gear and hiking boots.

They left nothing to chance...
kind of important when traveling across country or
camping in Oregon with 7 kids.
What are the memories we all have of those trips?
All of our memories are different.

On June 26th this year WE set out on a journey with Jesus
as he set his face toward Jerusalem.
The path has been long and sometimes difficult.

Remember when you took the 3 by 5 cards to write names on them...
Names of those to whom you would tell the good news?
Those names are on the altar, today.
Remember when Jesus invited Martha to sit and listen with her sister, Mary?

Remember when Jesus taught us to pray?
Your kingdom come, your will be done.
Remember how difficult the journey became as
Jesus began to tell us what it really means to be disciples?
Yeah, maybe we each remember the journey differently.

Today is one of those days on the journey.
You may have heard this parable. How do you recall it?

The moral of the story seems so simple:
Don't think too highly of yourself, you WILL be brought down.
When you recognize your worthlessness and sinfulness

you will be exalted, you will be raised up.

There you go! Sermon over! Move on!

Well, no.

You all called me to tell you the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so here goes.

Jesus speaks a parable to

“some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt”. Keep that in mind.

Two men went to the Temple to pray.

Not unusual, in fact quite common.

Look around you, we are here in the temple to pray.

One was a Pharisee,

a religious leader; a faithful servant of the temple;

a devout man; a man who followed the rules of Jewish living.

Look around you.

Who do you see?

Faithful servants, devout Christians,
leaders of the congregation.

The other was a tax collector.

His job was like an IRS agent, with a twist.

The Roman government established his tax collection quota and he could assess additional fees and charges which were his to keep.

What could go wrong with that?

He was free to charge whatever he wanted

as long as he paid the government what they demanded.

Look around you.

Who do you see? What is the work that we do?

Some people think pastors are over-paid;

That public employee unions are ruining our economy;

That health care professionals are responsible for the exorbitant rise in costs;

That hairdressers and auto mechanics are little more than servants.

The Pharisee begins his prayer:

I thank you God that I am not like other people.

He lists those “other people” – thieves, rogues, adulterers –
or worse yet this tax collector.

He goes on to list his many virtues.

And these ARE virtues.

Jewish law requires fasting only on Yom Kippur, once per year.

Our Jewish neighbors observed this fast of 25 hours just 10 days ago.

This Pharisee went far beyond the requirement by fasting twice a week.

He gave a tenth of all his income as is required of every Jew.

The Pharisee is a model of righteous practice.

The tax collector, too recognizes his place.
He recognizes that he is a sinner. Nothing more, nothing less.

Look around you, again...who do you see?
Look inside yourself...who do you see?
A Pharisee or a tax collector?

I'll tell you what I see from this vantage point...
and what I'm certain God sees:
I see an assembly of Pharisees who are also tax collectors.
That's right.
We are, as Martin Luther names it "simul justus et peccator".
Simultaneously just, or righteous, and sinful.

There is a dose of Pharisee and a dose of tax collector in us all.
So, before we humiliate the arrogant Pharisee or exalt the usurious tax collector,
let's take a step back to consider what Jesus tells us is the
"moral of the story".

The Pharisee, by his posture in prayer,
the words of his prayer and the conclusion he reaches
is correct in his self-assessment.
He addresses God with thankfulness.
He reminds God of his faithful service in the temple.
He goes off the rails when he sets himself apart from the people
whom HE assesses as "others".
Others who are less faithful than he.
The tax collector is still a tax collector
preying on the community to fatten his own wallet.
His prayer is also a faithful prayer.
He recognizes his need for God's mercy.
Does he repent of his sin? We don't know.
But that is not the point of this parable.

When we are tempted to pat ourselves on the back for our faithfulness
listen again to the prayer of the Pharisee and recall the journey we are on:
The Pharisee's prayer focuses on himself;
I thank you that I am not like... I fast, I give.
He sounds like the wealthy farmer who decided on his own
to build bigger barns for all his stuff.

Notice there is a physical chasm between the Pharisee and other sinners...
like the chasm between the rich man at his banquet table and
Lazarus languishing at the door.
His prayer names the transgressions of others
while exalting his own righteousness.

At its core, this prayer shows no compassion for God's beloved children.
As with the unjust judge, the Pharisee is not right with God or
with other people.

The tax collector also separates himself from the others in the temple.
He knows that he is despised in the community.
Like the lepers who called to Jesus, he calls from a distance
"Lord have mercy on me".

Both of these men are sinners in need of God's mercy.
We are all sinners in need of God's mercy.
And God is merciful to us.
Because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
we are made righteous saints in the sight of God.

Look around you, one more time...who do you see?
Look in the mirror...who do you see?
Saint? Sinner? Both?

My brothers and I recall our shared family vacation experiences differently.
As the children of God, we recall our shared experiences differently.
We sometimes disagree about our history and our future.

Yet, we are called to continue on the journey,
recognizing one another's gifts and
recognizing our individual and collective need for God's mercy.

Simul justus et peccator!
Sinner and saint, walking the journey together with Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God!