

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2022
“A Humble Approach” (Luke 18:9-14)

A young man went into a drug store to buy three boxes of chocolate: small, medium, and large. When the pharmacist asked him about the three boxes, he said, *Well, I am going over to my new girlfriend's house tonight for supper. Then we are going out for the evening. If she only lets me hold her hand, then I'll give her the small box. If she lets me kiss her on the cheek, then I'll give her the medium box. But if she really lets me smooch her, I'll give her the large box.* He made the purchase and left.

That evening as he sat down for dinner with his girlfriend's family, he asked if he could say the prayer before the meal. He began to pray and prayed a most earnest and intense prayer that lasted almost five minutes. When he finished his new girlfriend said, *You never told me you were such a religious person.* He said, *and you never told me your dad was a pharmacist.*

Sometimes, prayer is less about a heart-to-heart talk with God and more about impressing God and others. In our gospel text for today, Jesus tells a parable illustrating this very point. It is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, both of whom were well known figures in Jesus' day. One was considered righteous in the eyes of the world, and the other, unrighteous.

Let's briefly set the context for the parable. It comes right after last week's parable of the persistent widow that Jesus told to encourage his followers to pray always and never lose heart. There were, no doubt, some religious leaders in Jesus' audience. We know they often showed up when he was teaching in order to keep tabs on him. So, according to Luke, Jesus told this parable for the benefit of *those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.* In other words, he was addressing the religious leaders, those whom he had called hypocrites and, at another time, said of them, *they devour widows' houses and for show make lengthy prayers.*

In today's parable, the Pharisee and the tax collector both go to the temple to pray. When the Pharisee sees the tax collector, he thanks God that he is not like other people. He is not like the thieves, the liars, the adulterers, or even that tax collector who is praying over there. Like the young man in the opening story, who wanted to impress his girlfriend's father, the Pharisee goes on to tell God how good and holy he is. He doesn't fast only during the holy days, but twice a week. And he gives away more money than is required of him.

Can't you almost see the Pharisees in Jesus' audience smiling? Yes, Jesus had been very critical of them in the past, but now it finally seemed that Jesus recognized their goodness. They were certainly pious like the Pharisee in Jesus' story. They were obedient. And they were meticulous in their keeping of the law. How proud they must have been to be painted in such a light. Each one could see himself in the story.

It got even better when Jesus placed the Pharisee alongside the tax collector. How good the Pharisee looked when the holy man of God was contrasted with that scoundrel of a tax collector. Tax collectors, you'll remember, were considered outcasts and excluded from the Jewish community. They collaborated with the despised Roman Empire and were viewed as traitors

who chose to help the oppressive government rather than fight it. And not only were their salaries high, but they gained wealth off the backs of fellow Jews by cheating and overcharging them. And when the tax collector in the parable spoke, we can bet those Pharisees in the audience were thinking, *that miserable scoundrel **should** be hiding his head and beating his breast. He certainly got it right when he said he was a sinner.* It finally looked as though Jesus' eyes were fully open. Not only did he see them for the good men they were, but also recognized how depraved the tax collectors were. Maybe he would stop associating and eating with them.

Yes, they were feeling pretty good about themselves; But imagine their horror and confusion – and anger – when Jesus got to the punch line: that the tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee; *for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.* Jesus was saying that the Pharisee went home without the favor of God; without justification, without approval. And the “sinner” went home forgiven and at peace with God, confident of God's blessings and favor.

This particular parable – along with other encounters we find in the gospels between Jesus and the religious community – paint the Pharisees in a very negative light. Therefore, we often give them a bad rap. Yet, while they were not perfect – and definitely made some mistakes – they tried their best to honor God and work for the community they served. They took their faith seriously and cared deeply about their faith community. They believed that every Jew – not just the priestly elites – should have access to the Torah and should be able to observe it. So, they advocated for and established a free, universal, Jewish education system that was accessible to all – even the average everyday person.

Sure, there were some Pharisees whose intentions were not so great, or even downright wrong, but we see this in any group of people. For the most part, the Pharisees meant well and were doing the best they could. The problem, however, was when they compared their piety with others. That led to boasting before God and casting judgement – especially against those on the fringe of society.

That's the problem with the Pharisee in the parable. He thanks God for his virtues – or perhaps, for the lack of his vices – and recounts all the good things he has done. He goes before God in prayer, proud of whom he is and what he does, and thanks God that he is nothing like the praying tax collector. But what kind of prayer is that? He presents nothing before God but his extreme goodness and arrogantly looks down his nose at another, essentially declaring the tax collector to have no value before God or to society. His pride, however, is his downfall. Jesus points out that he is the one who leaves the temple without God's favor. But the tax collector, the one who is beating his breast, the one who can't even lift his eyes to heaven because he is so remorseful for his sin, the one who comes in repentance, seeking God's mercy, forgiveness, and a fresh start, is the one who leaves with God's favor.

I'm sure the actions of the Pharisee resonate with all of us. There are times when we are prideful in the things we do and times when we look down on others, judging them to be of lesser value because they are not like us: not our race, not our socioeconomic class, not our religion or denomination, not of our political party. We boast in our own goodness and point out the faults of others. Our arrogance is really on display when we approach God with this attitude, rather

than coming to him humbly, seeking his mercy. Truth is, our ears can't hear God when our mouths are too busy singing our own praises. There is no place for boasting, except that we boast in Christ. There is no place for finger pointing, except pointing to the cross. The Apostle Paul tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It is only by his grace that we are justified and reconciled with the God who loves us so much that he would sacrifice his only Son so that we might live with him forever.

This parable teaches us that there is a right way and a wrong way to approach the throne of God, whether in worship or in prayer. There is a right kind of heart to bring; not a heart that is arrogant and self-assured, but one that is humble and unpretentious. When approaching God – in worship or in prayer – we should come, casting ourselves upon God's love. In and of ourselves, we have nothing to bring before God except a life of sin, failures, and secrets in our hearts. We come to God, not because we are righteous, but to beg and receive God's mercy.

Our good deeds mean nothing. Through the prophet Isaiah, God tells us that all our righteous works are like filthy rags. Therefore, we can't present our good works as something to earn God's favor. We can only look to the grace and mercy of God found in Christ Jesus and his work upon the cross to redeem and save us. Like the tax collector, we should come humbly before God confessing that we have sinned and deserve nothing but punishment. We should come acknowledging the things we have done and the things we have failed to do, crying out for God to show us his mercy, rather than taking it for granted and thinking we have a leg up on others.

And God, who is merciful, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Then we can go down to our houses justified, at peace with God, and therefore, confident of God's favor and blessings. Thanks be to God. Amen.