

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: October 23, 2022

Proper 25: Luke 18: 9-14: *‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!

I think we would all agree that English is a funny language. Every region of this country has its own idioms, its own phrases, that make sense to us but sound ridiculous to people from other states and countries. Here is an idiom in Rhode Island, “Not for nothin.” If you say that, it was not for nothing that something happened, you are emphasizing that there was a very good reason for it to happen. Another idiom in Rhode Island like “a dime a dozen” to refer to something that is common. I learned another idiom from my father, “John, you’re getting too big for your britches.” I learned that idiom doesn’t speak at all to the size of one’s jeans. Rather it refers to someone who is over-confident or full of self-importance or someone is proud. Another idiom, “It’s not rocket science!” Every language has its own idioms that make perfect sense to its own people.

That’s the kind of people Jesus is speaking to in Luke’s Gospel: It’s tempting to think this story isn’t about us. But what if it is? As I have said before, Jesus’ stories are always a glimpse into the heart of Almighty God. And Jesus’

stories are meant to change our lives. Not to just inspire us. Not just to challenge us. Jesus' stories excavate our true character and motivations and challenge us to follow Jesus with a fearless commitment. That kind of commitment will change our life. This Gospel story is for everyone in this church.

Our story begins with these challenging words: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."' There's an old joke about a psychiatrist who is seeing a new patient for the first time. The psychiatrist says, "I'm not aware of your issue, so maybe you should start at the beginning." The patient rolls his eyes and sighs, "Alright, Alright, Alright!". "In the beginning, I created the heavens and the earth."

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the Pharisee in our story seems to think he's God's gift to Almighty God. And, let's face it, according to conventional values, he's an upright guy. He's not a robber, nor an evildoer, nor an adulterer. Surely, Jesus is holding him up as an example of how we should all

live, not how we shouldn't. But didn't Jesus begin this story by saying two men went up to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector?

The Pharisee was a solar opposite of the tax collector. Now, tax collectors were hated by the Jewish people of Jesus' day. They were often Jewish citizens who were hired by the oppressive Roman government to collect taxes from their fellow Jews. And Rome looked the other way if the tax collector added a few extra surcharges on top of the already-high taxes.

The tax collectors were held in such disrepute that they were not allowed to give testimony in court. They were considered societal outcasts, and utter disgraces to their families. Such men were considered the lowest of the low, so much so that they were excommunicated from the synagogue.

Now, let's listen in on the tax collector's prayer. Jesus continues in verse 13, *"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"* Wow! At least this man knows what he is, a sinner in need of God's mercy. Then Jesus gives the punch line to this story: *"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

So, why, why does Jesus do this? Why is Jesus so controversial? Why does Jesus criticize the fine, upstanding religious leader and praise the worthless tax collector? Of course, we know the answer: with every story he told, Jesus was trying to reveal the character of God and the nature of God's kingdom. God's goal is never to shame us, but to show us what we are missing out on when we don't understand the heart of God. So, what does Jesus want us to learn from these two men and their prayers? Notice that one man stood before God in his self-righteousness; the other man stood before God in his brokenness. Which did God prefer? What do you all think?

The answer, over 1600 years ago, the theologian and philosopher St. Augustine wrote to one of his students about what it takes to understand the truth of God. He said it requires three qualities. The first is humility; the second is humility; the third is humility."

But, why are brokenness and humility necessary for us to understand God? My brothers and sisters, our humility are God moments that can change our lives. As a priest and pastor, I have known people who have tried and tried to change in certain areas of their lives, and for whatever reason they have failed at it? I believe the reason some people cannot move on to positive changes in their spiritual lives is because they have never experienced real brokenness. In

other words, they have not hit bottom. As a priest and pastor, I will ask people who are in the process of transformation and change, “Have you cried about it?” This is the point where most of us walk away. This is the point where we retreat into our comfortable lives and miss out on the joy of confession and repentance. “Have you cried about it?”

We avoid our brokenness as much as possible. We try to protect our ego, our image, our self-sufficiency, as much as possible. They tell themselves, “I’m a good person, especially compared to them! After all, look at all the good things I’ve done. Look at how I have played by the rules.” We are still trying to earn God’s approval. And there is an inverse relationship between earning God’s approval and receiving God’s mercy. Do you see, the tax collector stood before God in his brokenness? The Pharisee will not stand in his brokenness before God. Why? Why, why will we not stand in our brokenness before God? So, what is the answer. It’s just one small word and that is pride. Our pride causes the inverse relationship between earning God’s approval and receiving God’s mercy.

That’s the second insight we get from our Gospel lesson . Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was full of pride and full of himself. The other man knew he was a sinner and the only chance he had was God’s mercy. There are

five words used to express the idea of mercy, compassion or pity in the New Testament. In our story today, when the tax collector prays, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” he uses an unusual word for *mercy*. He uses a Greek word that refers to pardoning a criminal or making atonement for another’s sin. Atonement in the Hebrew Bible is translated as “to cover.” God instituted the practice among the Hebrew people of making an animal sacrifice to cover over their sins. This was an atoning sacrifice. When the tax collector pleads for mercy in this prayer, he is saying, “God, I’m a sinner. I’ll never be good enough to deserve your forgiveness. I need you to take my place and be my atoning sacrifice.” And, of course my brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ himself became that atoning sacrifice.

A story, in March 2018, a 25-year-old man armed with a gun entered a supermarket in a small town. He shot a customer and a store clerk, then he took all the other customers and all the employees’ hostage. At one point, the gunman used a female hostage as a human shield to protect himself from the police. Col. Arnaud Beltrame offered to take the place of the female hostage, so she could go free. The gunman agreed with the trade. After a three-hour standoff, Col. Beltrame was killed by the gunman when a tactical team stormed the building to rescue the hostages. Beltrame’s brother Cedric commented, “He gave his life for strangers. He must have known that he

didn't really have a chance. If that doesn't make him a hero, I don't know what would." My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we know about heroes. Jesus Christ is our hero. Jesus is our atoning sacrifice. Jesus gave his perfect, sinless life to cover our sins. To offer us the mercy we could never be good enough to earn on our own.

Two men went up to the temple to pray. One man exalted himself and left unchanged; the other man humbled himself and left justified.

So, what did you expect when you came to church and worship today? Did you expect to enter the presence of the living God, the Creator of the universe, the Almighty God? Did you expect God to meet you here? More importantly, did you expect God to change your life?

It's astounding to me how little we expect from God. We expect to walk out these church doors the same people as we came in. And that is the tragic outcome of our self-righteousness. I'm good enough. I'm comfortable with my current priorities and agenda and good deeds. Nothing in me is broken.

Nothing in me needs to die. If that is true, then why did Jesus say, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

The tax collector stood in the presence of the holy God and didn't try to hide his sin and his brokenness and his shame. He recognized God's holiness and his own helplessness. So, he confessed his sin and cried out for mercy, and he received the fullness of God's love, the pardoning of all his sins, justification by God's grace. Not because he deserved it, simply because that is who God is and what God offers to those who humble themselves and seek Him with all their heart.

My favorite, Theologian Dutch Catholic priest and author, Henri Nouwen seemed to understand our struggle with self-righteousness and humility when he wrote this beautiful prayer:

Dear God, I am so afraid to open my clenched fists!

Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to?

Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands?

Please help me to gradually open my hands

and to discover that I am not what I own,

but what you want to give me.

My sisters and brothers, here is our challenge for the rest of our lives. Two men went up to the temple to pray. Only one of them left there pardoned, changed, set free from the burden of his sin. What made the difference? One

man showed up with empty hands and asked God to do for him what he couldn't do for himself. And God did the rest. I don't know what you were expecting when you came to church this evening/morning. I hope you were expecting to draw closer to God and be changed. If so, then come to God with honest confession, humility and empty hands. And leave here changed by the mercy of the God who gave His own life on the cross to save us and give us eternal life. Amen!