

THE PHARISEE & THE TAX COLLECTOR

Pentecost 22C – October 24, 2010

Joel 2:23-32

Psalm 65 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

You really have to feel sorry for the Pharisees. They seem to always end up on the wrong end of the stick in the Gospel stories. It's odd, because Jesus spends a good bit of time in their company. It seems like every time you turn around, the scene is set at dinner, at the home of a Pharisee – and then we have a conversation, or a parable, or some significant event occurs.

And by no means are all of the Pharisees bad guys. There is one occasion in the Gospel of Luke when some of the Pharisees came to Jesus and warned him that Herod was out to kill him.¹ Later, in the Acts of the Apostles, there are two instances where Pharisees act to protect the followers of Jesus.² The Pharisees were no doubt just as diverse a group of individuals as any other. But there is a common theme that we know about them.

They believed that they could *obtain* righteousness by way of their own beliefs, behaviors and deeds. And that, for me, is the point of this parable today. It is right there in the first sentence.

This is not a parable about humility. It's not a parable about the dangers of pride. It's not a parable about how to pray. It's not about making the Pharisee out to be the bad guy. And it's not about exalting the Tax Collector into some kind of role model for our prayer life. It's a parable about God's righteousness.

Do you remember the Gospel story a few weeks ago, of the Rich Man and Lazarus? Lazarus was a poor man, and he was sick.

Lazarus eventually died, right where he lived, at the gate of the Rich Man. One thing we know about the Rich Man in that story – he *would not* have been a Pharisee. A rich Pharisee would have seen to it that Lazarus was fed and taken care of. He would certainly not have actually touched Lazarus himself. But he would have paid for someone else to take care of Lazarus.

Pharisees were very, very concerned about what was clean, and what was unclean. Because if you were unclean, then you could not enter the Temple to pray or offer sacrifice. Not, at least, until you had performed certain complicated, ritual acts to 'purify yourself.'

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We hear today that Jesus told a parable to some of the people in the crowd. He was talking to the people who thought that they had righteousness in themselves. Not only that – they also looked upon others with contempt. One of the people in this story – the Pharisee – has an attitude of prayer that separates him from everybody around him. The separation is based on the conviction that he is better than everyone else. There are several things that are a bit odd thing about this guy's prayer.

Half of his prayer focuses on other people. And it's not as if he's *praying for* those other people. He's just thankful that he's not like *them*. This is a person who is so busy listing all the good things that he does – all the ways that he follows the Law and the traditions of his faith – that he doesn't have any time to listen to God. His hands, and his heart, his mind, and his soul are so full of his own *stuff* that there isn't really any room for God. He can't *hear* anything from God. BECAUSE HE WON'T SHUT UP. God can't get a word in edgewise. He can't *receive* anything from God. Because *he* thinks that he *already has* everything he needs. And he got it all from his own deeds and his own behavior.

Then Jesus talks about the other character in the parable. The tax collector's attitude of prayer is also one of separation. But here the attitude is one of remorse, of repentance. And he certainly has something about which to be remorseful. He's a tax collector.

At the time of Jesus, tax collectors were known to be collaborators. They work for the Romans. They are local Jews who force the payment of taxes and tolls beyond what was legally required. And then they pocket the difference. Everyone knows it. Everyone knows who the tax collectors are, And everyone knows what the tax collectors do.

So when this guy goes up to the Temple to pray, he stands over by himself. Almost as if to say that it's better to just go ahead and be by himself to begin with, rather than have people move away once they see who it is.

His prayer is simple.
He doesn't thank God for anything.
He doesn't praise God for anything.

He doesn't pray for anyone else.

The tax collector is *empty* in *his* soul. He asks God for *one thing*. He asks God for the one thing he needs. It's the one thing that the Pharisee needs, too – even if he's so self-absorbed that he can't notice. The one thing that we all need. The one thing that you need, and the one thing that I need.

*Jesus told this parable to some who **trusted in themselves** that they were righteous.*

We *all* stand at risk at becoming like the Pharisee. We must not allow ourselves to believe that any of our behaviors, any of our deeds, even any of our beliefs, can make us righteous.

Paul might have heard about this parable of Jesus, and had it in mind when he wrote to the new Christians in Galatia. *If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.*³

Righteousness does not come through the law. It is God who is righteous. Only God, who we know through Jesus Christ, is righteous. Nothing that we can do makes us righteous. No behavior that we can adopt – no behavior that we avoid – makes us righteous.

The Pharisees were wasting their time and energy. We cannot *make ourselves* pure. It is impossible for us to *do anything* that makes or keeps us ritually clean.

And that's okay.

Because we will all stand before God. The Pharisee, and the Tax Collector, and you, and me.

We will stand before a God who leaves the 99 other sheep to come and find us.⁴ A God who sees us coming home while we are still far away and runs to welcome us.⁵

A God who will not leave us standing there all alone, like the tax collector in today's parable. We will stand before a God who is faithful and righteous. A God who has heard and answered our prayer before we can even say the words – *God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*

¹ Luke 13:31

² Acts 5:34; 23:6-9

³ Galatians 2:21

⁴ Luke 15:4

⁵ Luke 10:33