

Proper 25: Year C. Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-6; 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Lord hear us. Lord forgive my failings and inadequacy! Do so in the name of your blessed son, our only friend and advocate, and the indwelling presence of your holy spirit, in whose sweet and pleasing words we pray. Amen.

In this morning's parable, Jesus speaks to an audience who was confident in their behavior and led lives they considered to be more faithful and obedient than many of their neighbors. Jesus tells his audience of a religious leader who likewise believed himself to be totally awesome in his pious behavior and obedience to the Law. This Pharisee went up to the Temple to pray.

Standing tall, the man thanked God that he was able to live his life beyond the requirements of the Torah. While the purity codes required fasting on the Day of Atonement, the Pharisee claimed to fast twice every week, he donated a tenth of his income, and unlike others, he was not an adulterer, thief or tax collector. (I can almost imagine him looking around the Temple mount and saying to anyone who might hear: "What a basket of irredeemable deplorables! Or perhaps less elegantly: "What a bunch of lying, unattractive, crooks!") He praised God that he was different and was truly grateful.

The name Pharisee has its root in the Hebrew word meaning separated. As you likely know, the Pharisees were a religious party that functioned as authoritative interpreters of Mosaic Law.

Unlike the Sadducees who applied the Law literally, the Pharisees believed that in addition to the Pentateuch Moses had been bequeathed an oral tradition useful in applying the Torah flexibly to everyday life situations. From a young age, aspiring Pharisees were required to memorize this

oral Torah, the Mishnah. While respected for their knowledge and pious lifestyles, many regarded Pharisees as arrogant and hypocritical. To be sure Pharisaic teachers were not always warmly received. And you could see them coming, with trimmed and perfumed beards, phylacteries bound to elbow and forehead and wide fringes of covenantal blue sewn to their robes. We know of them in the Gospels primarily for their challenges to Jesus for the bad company he kept (sex workers and tax collectors) and his work on the Sabbath.

Jesus also tells his audience of a Publican who went up to the Temple to pray. (I am talking about a publican, not a Republican.) In Ireland, the word refers to a barkeep, but in first century Jerusalem it meant a tax collector. Publicans held franchises from the Roman government. In exchange for payment to the Roman fisc of sums certain, these tax collectors were permitted to collect whatever they could extort from the Jews and to keep the difference. Publicans tended to hang out with each other for they were understandably regarded by the Jewish people as agents of the hated Romans and vile robbers and thieves.

In contrast to the boastful Pharisee, the tax collector stood far off, his eyes lowered to the ground. Pounding his chest in a show of abnegation, he prayed: "God have mercy on me, a sinner." The tax collector held himself in the same regard as those he robbed. Yet Jesus said: "I tell you. this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The parable's sketch of the two men and their prayers is obviously intended to be a study in contrast. However, the Pharisee and the Publican have much in common. They are both Jews. They are both in search of God's favor in prayer. Most important, they are both isolated and alone by virtue of their own life choices.

My friend and Old Testament teacher, Carolyn Sharp, has observed: "It is human nature to rely on carefully nuanced distinctions of status and power in order to position ourselves at maximum advantage. Self-promotion has always been a fundamental human tendency—even [perhaps especially] in communities gathered around Scripture—and it has reached new heights in our media-saturated global culture. . . . The surprise of Luke's story is not that the tax collector perceives himself to be a sinner: the implied audience of the text would have agreed heartily. No, the dramatic moment here is the revelation that a credentialed religious leader who has faithfully observed the Law is not justified before God. Living a life of hyperbolic fidelity to the Torah has not availed: keeping oneself apart from immoral behavior; fasting regularly; and tithing are not enough."

I confess that for much of my life I sought to set myself apart. Whether in seeking entrance to good schools or high class standing or in kicking butt in the courtroom or striving for (and mostly failing to achieve) a virtuous life, I tried hard to be different, even superior. When graced by the narrative of another's life, I mentally brought out the yardstick of my own accomplishment and was reassured. I rationalized that I was only competing against myself in an effort to be the best that I could be. That was not the whole truth or even the half of it. I was

really donning the armor of achievement to protect myself from the hurt of rejection by others. In my seeming independence, I stood far off, my gaze lowered to the ground and alone. I was both Pharisee and Publican.

What are you? Do you sit in smugness or abnegation? As you scan the pews around you, what do you see? Do you see Pharisees or Publicans? Are there folks who make you wary or who have slighted, “dissed” or offended you in some way? Is there anyone here you look at and wonder who the heck they think they are? Do you really know them? Have you opened yourself to them or extended a hand of welcome? Do you offer respect to those around you? The Latin roots of that word are spect:look and re:again. Give those you have written off a second look.

Rev. Kate Heichler, whose Stamford, Connecticut church I served as seminarian, tells the story of a motorcycle mama who arrived one day at Kate’s church door. A large, leathered, tattooed and scary looking woman, she ended up helping Kate cook a parish dinner and teaching Kate how chefs chop onions. The woman joined the church and later went to seminary. Kate urges that instead of dropping off sandwiches for the homeless to accumulate points on our heavenly rewards cards, we also take the risk of talking to them.

That is also a rewarding way of being church together. We can all begin a closer walk with God by finding Jesus in the mirror of another’s face. Spoiler alert. Next week you will be encouraged to bear one another’s burdens. You can only effectively do this if you are willing to come out from behind the Pharisee’s mask of better than, lay down the Publican’s sorry

disposition and reveal your own vexations and troubles. It is hard to take empathy from perfection.

Over time, I have realized that God does not love you because you are good. God loves you because God is good. As Father Richard Rohr writes in his new book on Trinity: You cannot earn something you already have. You cannot achieve something that is already freely and totally given to you. God's love is not limited by the worthiness or unworthiness of its object. God cannot NOT love because love is the essential nature of God's being.

Then why does the second letter to Timothy depict Paul, trained as a Pharisee and a former tax collector, as one who fought the great fight, run the race and kept the faith and thereby earned the crown of righteousness? Is Paul, like the other Pharisee, haughty in his accomplishments and laying claim to earned righteousness? No. There is a difference. Although deserted by others in his trials, Paul knows that God, who stood by Paul and gave him strength in his ministry, is merciful and will keep him strong as he faces death, just as God will bestow mercy on all others who accept God's love and long for his appearing.

May you boldly expose yourself to the love of God by making yourself known to each other. Then you will not be alone.

