

Jesus told the disciples a parable about two Pharisees and a tax collector.

Today, he could have told them a parable like this:

Two people went to the gym, our bodies being temples of God as you know.

One was a regular at this establishment. The other, well, not so much.

The first was adding another 10 pounds to the bench press when they caught a glimpse of the second. “Thank god that I’m not like that one over there,” said the first. “That body is a disgrace. I eat only organic, non-GMO food. I’m here five times a week so I’m in shape. AND, I support public broadcasting with a sustaining membership.”

The second person stood off to the side, trying to turn on the treadmill. “Forgive me god,” the second said. “I really like bacon.”

Parables were the tool Jesus used to challenge life circumstances. The easy thing to do when you hear this parable is to say to oneself, “I’m more like the tax

collector than the Pharisee.” But, is that not like being the Pharisee? Analyzing this parable is dangerous work.

Yes, the Pharisee and the first person at the gym are pompous. They are not pompous because of what they said as much as how they say it. There is truth in both their statements, right? They are both following the path laid out for them for their spiritual or physical health. Their statements are judgmental. “I’m way better than the other because I follow the rules.”

The tax collector and the second person at the gym are endearing. They remind us of our own failings. They inspire us with their noble confessions. The difficulty is that while their penance is real today, the person at the gym will likely cave into the bacon addiction at breakfast tomorrow and the tax collector won’t give up that day job.

So, who needs God more?

The answer is that they both need God. They are both broken.

The difference is how.

The first persons are so sure of themselves that they completely dismiss the efforts of the seconds. They see only their own efforts and measure those efforts to their own standards...standards of perfection that no one can reach. The second persons repent with little thought to how their pattern of behavior will have them back on their knees confessing the same sins over and over in perpetuity.

Without knowing their hearts, as God does, our responses to these broken people usually are of contempt or pity or something in between. Mere mortals cannot discern for God who deserves mercy and how it should be meted out. That discernment is beyond our pay grade.

What do we do with this teaching then? How do we respond?

Perhaps our first step is to confess our own sins. It's so easy to point to another and describe their sins. Let's face it, some of those sins are obvious. But, if we are honest with ourselves when we look in the mirror, ours are too.

Next, repent. Turn it around. Let God make a new thing happen in you. Clinging to our old selves only keeps the cycles of dis-ease turning. Believe that God loves you. Believe that God forgives you. With this knowledge in your heart and in your soul, see your brothers and sisters with compassion and kindness. Look upon those who are beginning their faith journey and offer to walk beside them. Find someone who has gone one step beyond yours and ask for their companionship. Remember that you are baptized – and with it comes a community to help you with your journey.

Last, but not least, pray to Almighty and everlasting God, to increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and love. *Amen.*