

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost  
23 October 2016

Scripture readings:

Joel 2:23-32

Psalms 65

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

I'm really tempted to say, "*Well, the gospel's clear enough and preaches its own sermon. Amen.*" [laughter] Then the word would get out that that's the Sunday you missed - so I'm not gonna. [laughter] There's too much here to be ignored.

It's an extraordinary parable when Jesus again takes on the established religious community, a community that knew - just as we do - what to do to be religious. That's the negative example. They knew what to eat and what not to eat. They knew to fast. They knew to tithe. Here we are at the concluding of our stewardship campaign and I think getting longer arms for patting ourselves on the back, doing not a half bad job of supporting this institution which is significant to us. And I think we must remember that Pharisees always get this bad reputation, but they weren't bad people. They were seriously, honestly trying to get it right. They were trying to save themselves, and they've worked out a whole bunch of ideas which, frankly, I think in the end are pretty peculiar. We certainly didn't obey the rule last night at the sauerkraut and pork supper. I don't really care, and don't think God does, whether or not we're circumcised. We often wear clothing that is of mixed fabrics. We break the law all of the time.

The Pharisee was convinced that keeping the law would be good for him and please God and that those who didn't keep the law didn't please God and that God was angry with them and that they who didn't do things the Pharisee's way were, in fact, the enemy. So often religion looks like that. We know what to do, we know what's right, we know what pleases God, and we know what saves us. Jesus tells this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. They thought they were better.

That word *contempt* is interesting. This is just a parenthetical explanation of where that comes from in my experience. There was at Muhlenberg College in my days a professor of religion who had been a geologist and was a Lutheran pastor and had worked in the Confessing Church of the Resistance during the war in Germany. When he preached at the chapel at Muhlenberg all the students came. Muhlenberg is a Lutheran school, but most of its students are Roman Catholics and Jews. It has a very, very fine pre-med program, and all of the Jewish students came to chapel when Dr. Staack preached. All of this about the word contempt. He told the tragic and very, very sad story of being in Germany during the war and the stormtroopers going into the synagogue and taking the scrolls, unrolling the scrolls in the street, and then he said, "*The stormtroopers took down their pants and they crapped on the scrolls to show their contempt.*" Now that's contemptible - crapping on the word of God.

Well, these Pharisees weren't doing that, but Jesus apparently felt they were missing the point. I think as we live our lives and we encounter Jesus, we pretty much, as the Pharisee, need occasionally to be prepared to hear Jesus say, "*You know, gang, you're missing the point.*" To us Pharisee sounds like a bad word, but that's a good word. A Pharisee was a good church-goer, a

tither, a faster, maybe a Sunday School teacher, a church council president, a committee member, an altar guild member, a stewardship chairperson - what we are - and he was serious about that. But he felt somehow that what he did religiously justified him. Maybe his first mistake was to think that he *needed* to be justified. And maybe his second mistake was that he thought that he could do his own justification.

It's very clear at the beginning of this passage that Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves, and that's the problem that we face this morning. They thought there was something that they themselves could do that was religious that would make them favored in the sight of God or forgiven in the sight of God or justified in the sight of God or special in the sight of God because of what they did or what they gave or how they worshiped or what they wore or what they ate. And Jesus says this man said things that embarrass us. Standing by himself, he was praying thus, loudly enough for somebody else to hear: "*God, I thank you that I am not like other people.*" Do you know the word that's used in pre-Christian scriptures for *other people*? Do you know the word *gentiles*, non-Jewish people. It's the same word in Spanish, *la gente*, which means "the people." It just means all the other people except us are not beloved by God as we are, do not have the same relationship with God as we do. They are "the people." "*I thank you, God, that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*" You know what that means. You know one of the most famous political phrases in all of 20<sup>th</sup> century politics: "*I am not a crook.*"

Here is this Pharisee. Can you get to the point where you almost pity him? He is desperate to prove that he is somehow better than somebody else, and he looks to the lowest rungs of society and the most obvious crimes of other people and says, "*Look, I'm not like they are.*" Well, I have a feeling that the Pharisee *was* a thief. He was in his religious ideas attempting to steal from other people their integrity. I think he *was* a rogue. He was creating for himself a God who loved him and nobody else - or not everybody else. I think he was an adulterator of the love of God, and I think he *did* collect taxes. He taxed the rest of the world with his religious ideas by imposing upon them ideas, identities and judgements that they were less than he was. And he used his finger of righteousness and religion and propriety and superiority to point at them. And that was accompanied with a rather long nose down which he looked!

Then Jesus says, "*But the tax collector, standing far off*" - back of the room, in the vestibule perhaps, or the narthex - "*would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'*"

Now somewhere in the Pharisee's understanding of his religious behavior and life was the understanding that he needed to justify himself, so the Pharisee understood somehow or another that he was a sinner. But he certainly wasn't as bad as *she* was. He certainly wasn't as bad as *they* are. He certainly had a closer connection to God than *he* does. His sense of superiority in these things is pretty clear. He acknowledges that his sin is white and theirs is black. His sin is kind of a good kind of sin, a tolerable sin. I mean everybody does *that*, right? But not everybody does that.

So Jesus lifts up the example of this guy who is a crook, who knows he's a crook, who

acknowledges that he is a crook, who is stricken with his own sense of himself so badly that he cannot lift his eyes unto heaven. He was beating his breast. He was hard on himself, and he said, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”* That’s all we know about the tax collector.

Now both the tax collector and the Pharisee, I feel, used the law. The Pharisee knew what the law was and used it in terms of trying to make himself better than others, of trying to justify himself before God, of trying to do the right thing. He obeyed all the laws. You know what - so did the tax collector. The tax collector knew the law because the tax collector was convicted by the law. The tax collector sat there and thought, *“I am not good. The law condemns me. I have broken the law.”*

Now this is an interesting point because at the time of the Reformation there was a discussion about how the law should be used when people were reading scripture for themselves and learning things about grace and all the rest of it that had always been in scripture. They had a discussion about the uses of the law. They thought there may have been at least three. One was as a sample or a model for civil government. So whether or not you’re in favor of the Ten Commandments being put up front in a courtroom is irrelevant to me. You can be sure in the last thousand or two thousand years the law of Moses or the law of Mohammed have formed the basis of civil governments and organizations for a very long time. So that’s been sort of agreed upon. There is a moral basis for government somehow somewhere. And we probably have done a better job of that than most of the world, particularly as we consider things like separation of church and state and all the rest of it.

The second use of the law was that, read correctly, the law is used to condemn us. If you ever studied catechisms - and catechisms can be really a lot of fun. They can also be dead boring. But you read Luther’s and other people’s definitions of the Ten Commandments, you read that, understood correctly, feeling poorly about others is a form of assassinating others. You know we do that all the time. Character assassination, etc., etc., etc. And how, taken seriously and theologically, every one of those commandments is something we break somehow or another. So the law is there to inform us that we are, with the tax collector, sinners.

But the third use of the law that the Reformers could not agree upon - thank goodness - was that the law was there for us to use to justify ourselves, that if we obeyed the law we became just before God, and therefore we were right and everybody else was wrong because we obeyed the law and they didn’t. Thank goodness for the Reformers who thought about that before we got here.

So Jesus looks at this guy and says, *“I tell you this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.”* Why? Because he didn’t try to do his own justification. He wasn’t good enough to do that. And that’s not a new idea. Did you hear the psalm today? *“Our sins are stronger than we are but you, God, will blot them out.”* This isn’t a brand new idea. This isn’t a Christian idea. This is a faithful idea from generations before that our sin is larger than we are and, frankly, we cannot save ourselves no matter what we do, no matter how much money we give away, no matter how nice we are, no matter how many old ladies we help across the street, or cans of food that we give to the food drive or clothing - none of it saves us. That’s God’s job,

thank goodness! Because we're bad at it, as bad at it as the Pharisee was.

But our joy is that we understand ourselves, as the tax collector came to understand himself, as people who cannot forgive ourselves, who have been incapable of lifting our eyes to God and then said what he says: "*Be merciful to me, I who am a sinner.*"

Now what's the real difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector? It's the forefinger. The Pharisee uses the forefinger to point at others; the tax collector uses the forefinger of the law to point at himself. You know my idea about this from over the years - that I think a forefinger is made to point with but only at the person to whom it's connected. So the tax collector understands his own problem and understands that he is not the solution to his own problem. Where the finger is pointed affects the relationship that the Pharisee has with other people in the world and the tax collector has with other people in the world.

So Jesus says your religiosity isn't about the stuff you do or the money you give or the prayers you say. It's about how you relate to other people in the world. The Pharisee related to the people as the superior, religious, haughty, arrogant, self-righteous man. The tax collector understood that he had done the same thing but allowed himself to be convicted by the law, confesses that to God, and asks God to use him differently.

And so I believe the proof in the pudding of this gospel comes when both men leave the temple or the synagogue or the church or their own bedside from their prayers. The proof in this pudding is how we relate to others in the world, especially to those who do not worship the same way we do. The Pharisee and the tax collector are nothing other than big fat sinners. They're in the same hell-bound boat. But the Pharisee thinks he can save that boat from sinking, and the tax collector knows he can't. Jesus says pay attention to the tax collector when you finally wake up, when you use the law as your own mirror, when you finally wake up to yourself and know that it's the tax collector who was justified by God who is in way better shape than the self-righteous religious dingbat. So let us be careful, "*for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*" That's probably enough to chew on for a week.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.