

Reformation/Confirmation, October 27, 2019

(Luke 18:9-14; Jer 31:31-34; Ps 46; Ro 3:19-28)

In today's gospel Luke tells us Jesus was speaking to **some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt.**

In this parable Jesus described the faithful works of a Pharisee, a recognized religious authority. He went to the temple and prayed aloud, boasting of his faithfulness. He fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of his income. And he gave loud thanks to God that he wasn't like "other people," including thieves, rogues, adulterers, and the other man praying there, "**this tax collector.**"

You have to understand about tax collectors. They were local men, Jewish, employed by the Romans who ruled over that part of the world. Many of these tax collectors would sit at the gate of a city or town and rake in the toll for the day—and they could demand as much as they wanted. They had the power to over-tax, and everyone assumed they were all **thieves and rogues.**

So you can imagine how shocked the people were when Jesus announced it was the *tax collector*, not the Pharisee, who found favor with God. The tax collector, who knew he was in need of God's mercy and cried out, **God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**

The Pharisee was deeply religious. *Really.* He tried hard to keep the laws as he understood them, because he believed that was the way to salvation. He assumed that God would recognize his excellence and give him an appropriate reward.

And the tax collector really was a member of a guild known for dishonesty, oppression, and sinfulness. They were literally *fraternizing with the enemy.*

But the Pharisee trusted *in himself* and what he could do. The tax collector trusted in God, and what God *would* do. He knew his salvation could come only from the mercy of God. There was nothing at all he could do on his own behalf except pray, *humbly*.

The sin of the Pharisee was his *scorn and contempt* for those who weren't like him. He compared himself with others and found them wanting. *He* was virtuous—and since others weren't like him, they must therefore be *unrighteous*. But he was overlooking the fact that it's *God's* right to judge, not ours. We remember these words of Jesus: **Judge not, and you will not be judged.**

Listen to this week's devotional from my Methodist colleague Steve Garnaas-Holmes, and please don't take offense at his language. He starts by quoting the gospel, then writes his own response:

*The Pharisee, standing alone, prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." Here's Pastor Steve's response: Wow. What a hypocrite. What an egotistical, arrogant, judgmental person. God, I thank you that I am not like him—Oh . . . wait . . . Crap. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I confess to you all the people I want to be better than. But I am not. It is your goodness, not mine, I live by. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. (end quote)*

Our faith has nothing to do with comparing ourselves to our neighbors. Our faith is *our relationship with God*. For the Pharisees, faith involved following the Law of Moses in order to deserve salvation. But this parable proclaims a radical gospel that diminishes even our best efforts at religious faithfulness—*a radical gospel that blesses and forgives even those we may see as contemptible*. (repeat)

It was the Pharisee's very pride in his own righteousness that condemned him in the eyes of Jesus. He was missing the whole point of the gospel: *we can do nothing to save ourselves*. We're *totally* dependent on the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God. Thank God his grace, mercy, and forgiveness are so freely given! Thank God he shed his own blood to ensure our salvation!

In baptism God showered us with his love and promise, when we were *sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever*. Through baptism we're united under the cross of Christ. Not by our striving to be good, or by keeping all the laws, but by the astonishing, amazing grace of a God whose love is beyond our comprehension.

**We are saved by grace, through faith alone, not by anything we do!** This is the most important thing Martin Luther sought to teach German Christians in 1517, when he nailed his 95 Theses to the cathedral door in Wittenberg.

This is the most important thing our Confirmands have learned. We can't *do* anything to earn God's favor. We can only accept it. *We love because he first loved us*.

We learned in today's gospel that faith isn't about judging who's better or who's worse, who's in or who's out. It isn't about distinctions between right or wrong, between black or white or shades of gray. Faith is about our sins being forgiven.

The Pharisee prided himself on his own righteousness. The tax collector knew he was a sinner and had absolutely nothing going for him. All he could do was cry for mercy—and that was all it took. He came to the temple a sinner and went home forgiven. **Thanks be to God!**