

Luke 18:9-14

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."

I find this a challenging parable. The Pharisee is in all likelihood making true statements. He's adhering to the law as God, Yahweh, has commanded. The Pharisees were part of a sect who, like Jesus, were bringing the spirituality of their religion into the daily lives of the people. They were teachers. I remember a lecture I attended in Spokane a few years ago with New Testament scholar, Dr. Amy Jill-Levine, at which she spoke about how Jesus was more often than not in alignment with the Pharisees. That they probably had robust conversations on the best way to bring God into the daily lives of the people. In another commentary that I read, it stated that it was some Pharisees who warned Jesus to get away because Herod was seeking to kill him.

So, his use of a Pharisee in the parable in a negative light, is a little disconcerting. Some were his colleagues, in a way. Then he contrasts the Pharisee with the tax collector who is also being truthful in his prayer about himself. Rome used representatives of conquered peoples to collect their taxes and the tax collectors would not only collect Rome's taxes, but would also collect more for themselves, some becoming quite rich. And so they were considered some of the lowest of the low in the Jewish community in Jesus' time.

But, Jesus uses the two examples in order to jolt those who listen to him. In order to jolt us, out of our complacency. It's too easy perhaps for us to pat ourselves on the back while pointing the finger at others. In a way this parable is akin to Matthew's Gospel when Jesus tells us to take the log out of our own eye before looking at the speck in someone else's. I've always figured that removing the log from my eye is a lifelong endeavor, and yet, I can find myself at times to be as judgmental as this particular example of a Pharisee. I have to work at concentrating on my own sins, my own brokenness, when I come before God. And since God is everyone I go – I'm before God all the time.

And I think that is ultimately the point of today's parable. Our prayers are meant to offer us time of self-reflection before God. They are a conversation with God about our own relationship with God. The Pharisee in

the parable has perhaps forgotten this. Forgotten that his righteousness is reliant upon God. We try to remember in our baptismal covenant when we say, "I will with God's help." I wonder, as I listen to him if he has never stumbled, because we all do. The tax collector on the other hand, not only in word, but also in his very posture, never forgets that before the perfection of God, he is always a sinner, even as he is a beloved child of God, asking for mercy. In truth, both people in the parable are beloved children of God even in their sinfulness.

That's also challenging. We are sinner's, broken people, AND we are beloved. How can we presume to approach God and God's banquet? Yet it is God who is always, always inviting us and welcoming us. It's a conundrum. A poem that I was first introduced to in Seminary, sums up how we as Christians find ourselves coming before God to the banquet. It was written by priest and country parson, George Herbert in the late 1600's. It could be about the heavenly banquet to which we all come at the end, and the banquet we come to every single time we partake of the Eucharistic feast. It's entitled, LOVE III. It's about someone who finds himself in a place where he doesn't think he belongs.

GEORGE HERBERT

Love

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'

‘And know you not,’ says Love, ‘Who bore the blame?’
‘My dear, then I will serve.’
‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’
So I did sit and eat.

I have pondered this poem at various times throughout my ministry. As I considered the tax collector in the parable, it came to me that each and every one who sits beside me at the banquet, has had this conversation with our Lord. Those we might consider above reproach, those we think less worthy than us, whom we have judged either because we have been perhaps hurt by someone in some way. When we get right down to it in our souls, we all, like the tax collector know how we have marred our souls in this life – intentionally or unintentionally, “...those things we have done and for what we have left undone.”

But as Jesus said, and I think as the poem really hones in on, when we are able to come before God without pride, without self-justification, but come in humble acceptance of God’s love and compassion not only for us, but also for all who sit next to us at the banquet, who are also struggling, who are also in need of forgiveness and healing as we are. When we do that, then we will know what true Love is. Then we will know God. AMEN.

- Rev. Frances Twigg, 10-26-25