

Proper 25C 2016 Sermon

October 23, 2016

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 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."

2 Timothy 4:6-8

I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

If anyone thinks that the Bible is an ancient book with no relevance to the issues of our modern society, one has to look no further than today's Gospel parable to refute that idea. For nothing could be **more** relevant to our life together as "one nation under God" than today's Gospel parable. Luke says that Jesus told this parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." (v. 9)

We see it played out so clearly and starkly in the present political campaign! Each side dead sure that they are right and righteous, while treating the other with contempt. Hardly the way to act if we truly believe ourselves to be "one nation under God, indivisible..." Quite the contrary: the approach and attitude of those vying to lead our nation is calculated to create difference and divisiveness, an "us vs. them" mentality. And our Gospel parable clearly illustrates what is going on under the surface of the struggle for the leadership of our beloved nation.

A Pharisee and a Tax Collector go up to the Temple to pray. So we should begin by asking, "What does it mean to pray?" There are many definitions of prayer, to be sure; but let me suggest that, no matter what your definition, prayer involves opening oneself to God. Opening oneself to God. And we don't see the Pharisee doing this. For although he *outwardly* addresses God, he is actually speaking to himself. The pronoun 'I' is repeated four times. **He** is the center of his own prayer. In fact, if we look closely, we see that the Pharisee's "prayer" consists of a self-congratulatory accounting of the Pharisee's own virtues and achievements.

Far from wanting to open himself to God, what the Pharisee is *really* after is **comparing** himself to *others*, and finding them lacking. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.”

My friends, comparison and competition, by definition, sets one thing or person against another. It is, by its nature, divisive. This Pharisee is setting himself above and apart from “other people.” He has divided the field, just as our present political campaign is dividing our nation, not by arguing that one candidate’s *policies* are better for our nation than the other candidate’s policies (which is what the discussion should be about), but by putting oneself and one’s party above the other candidate and party, which are then treated, as our Gospel says, with contempt.

Where is there any prayer at all in this kind of behavior? Where is the humble openness to God? Like the Pharisee, I’m afraid that we in our nation today *talk* about “one nation under God, indivisible,” but the way we *act* shows that we do NOT place ourselves *under God*, but rather under our **own** ambitions and authority; and far from working to be a nation that is “indivisible,” we divide our nation by treating the “other” with contempt.

In the Prayer of Humble Access from our Rite I Eucharist, we pray, “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.” (*Book of Common Prayer* p. 337) Yet, like the Pharisee in our parable, we all too often trust in our own righteousness rather than God’s mercy, love, and grace.

Now, let’s ask the question, “Which is more central to a Christian’s life: Our own righteousness, or God’s manifold and great mercies?”

Jesus’ life, which we are called to emulate, centered not on strictly obeying the Jewish laws (which was what the Pharisee believed **his** life to be about), but rather on the mercy, love, and grace of God. For Jesus, there are 2 Commandments: Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. The *Beatitudes*, rather than the 10 Commandments, are **Jesus’** central teaching. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It is another way of phrasing the last part of today’s Gospel, “all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Fr. Richard Rohr writes, “Obeying the 10 Commandments can appeal to our egotistic consciousness and our need to be ‘right’ or better than others. With the Beatitudes, there is no social or ego payoff... The Beatitudes... reveal a world of pure grace and abundance...” (*from an email meditation*)

Author Frederick Buechner asks, “Is competition ever healthy — the desire to do better, be better, look better than somebody else? Do you write better poetry or play better tennis or do better in business or stand in higher esteem generally,

even in self-esteem, if your chief motivation is to be head of the pack? Even if you win the rat race, as somebody has said, are you any less a rat?

“... Maybe it's not competition but cooperation and comradeship that build the only character worth building...” When St. Paul, near the end of his life, writes in today's Epistle, “I have fought the good fight,” his meaning is not that we overcome the best of the competition but rather that we overcome the worst in ourselves. When he says, “I have finished the race,” the object is not to get there *first*, but just to get there. (Buechner, originally published in *Whistling in the Dark* and later in *Beyond Words*) It is more like the attitude most people have when they enter a marathon: the goal is not to come in *first*, but simply *to finish*; and we rejoice with all those others who have also finished the race, for we are all in the race together.

The kind of ego-centered self-righteousness and denigrating of others which is exhibited by the Pharisee (and by political candidates and all-too-often, if we are honest, by ourselves) alienates us from both God and neighbor. It does not acknowledge God as the source of every positive action; and therefore it cuts us off from the flow of grace that grounds every good work. In our Gospel parable, the Pharisee has tried to achieve his own righteousness, but Jesus tell us that it is the Tax Collector, who admits to his own failings and sin and pleads for God's mercy and grace, who is justified by God. Justification is not something we *achieve*, but something that is *given* by God. The Pharisee cannot receive God's justifying grace, because he is too filled with his own righteousness.

My friends, can we not see what is happening in our nation? The ego-centered, self-exalting comparison and belittling criticism that has bombarded us throughout this long political campaign alienates us from both God and neighbor, and so cuts us off from the flow of grace that grounds every good work. What will happen after the election? How can such intense polarization be healed? How can we become “one nation under God, indivisible?”

We must first realize that the goal is unity with one another, not besting and denigrating the other. Next Sunday we will reaffirm our baptismal vow to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself,” or as some scholars translate it, “loving our neighbor *who is ourself*.” For in Jesus' last prayer before he was arrested and crucified, he prayed that we might all be one, even as he and his Heavenly Father are one. (John 17:21) Unity accomplished through God's grace and love, not division created by competition and comparison.

20th-Century priest and monk Thomas Merton once had a powerful experience of common humanity that profoundly altered his life. I would like to finish with Merton's telling of that experience:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I

loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation. . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I **am** like other men, that I am only a man among others." . . . It is glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes terrible mistakes; yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race!
(*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* [New York: Doubleday, 1966] 156-7)

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, may our prayer be your own: that we be one, as you and the Father are one. One nation under God, indivisible; seeking and serving you in all persons, loving our neighbor, who is ourself.

AMEN