

Proper 25C 2019 Sermon

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.”

Our Gospel lesson today is a parable about how two different people, a Pharisee and a tax collector, relate to God, themselves, and others.

Our lesson begins: “[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

Now, normally, when Jesus teaches, his audience is either “the crowds,” his disciples, “the Pharisees and scribes,” etc. But the audience for this particular teaching is described in a highly unusual way – unique in all of the Gospels! Jesus is speaking to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Now, I think that such people could be found in *any* group – among the scribes and Pharisees, yes; but also among the crowds who followed Jesus, among Jesus’ own disciples, *and* – among us. Certainly, *I* have been guilty of trusting in my own righteousness and regarding others with contempt – and I would guess that you have, too. And I think that, if we looked at our world today, especially in our political election process (which only appeals to our inner inclinations), we would see people touting their own righteousness and rightness while, publicly and blatantly, treating others with contempt. And Republicans, Democrats, and Independents are all guilty. We are all guilty.

So, my friends, this parable could not be *more* relevant to me, to you, and to our world today. For when Luke tells us that Jesus directs his parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt,” that’s us – at least, part of the time.

Fr. John Shea has some great insights into today’s Gospel, so I would like to quote him at some length.¹ Fr Shea says that the audience to whom Jesus is speaking “are people who have managed to inhabit the relationship between God, self, and others in a twisted way. Instead of trusting in God..., they trust in themselves. This mistake earns them the name: the self-righteous. It also results in an excessive focus on the ego that unfolds into contempt for others. Those who are self-righteous need others to look down on. This is how they maintain their

elevated sense of themselves. These psychological dynamics result in severing the relational ties between God, self, and others. Therefore, the self-righteous live with a separate sense of self that is neither indebted to God nor connected to neighbor...

“The [parable] contrasts two ways of praying. The Pharisee’s posture of standing by himself symbolizes his haughty and isolated attitude, an attitude that will permeate his brief but revealing prayer. Although he begins [his prayer] by thanking God, ...[in reality, it] is merely polite protocol, something proper praying should include. If there is any **real** gratitude, it is only appreciation for [God making him superior], making him ‘not like other men.’ Although the Pharisee may be addressing God, he is really talking to himself. The pronoun ‘I’ is repeated four times. *He* is the center of his own prayer. [Not God.]

“The Pharisee’s recital of his virtues highlights his excessive ego focus. He compliments himself on his over-the-top perfection. He goes well beyond what the law prescribes, fasting and tithing more than is required. In *his* mind his zealous practice makes him special and separates him from the riff raff... The far-off tax collector is proof positive he [the Pharisee] is not like other men. For the Pharisee, the *real* action is between him and the tax collector. God, the focus of all **genuine** prayer, has receded completely into the background. Just as the introduction to the parable has predicted, the Pharisee is simultaneously trusting in himself and berating others. Both attitudes go hand in hand...

“The tax collector is a study in contrast. Whatever the Pharisee is, *he* is not. He does not arrogantly stand by himself, but humbly at a distance. He does not push his own achievements, but bows in reverence and beats his breast in repentance. The words of his prayer acknowledge only the merciful God and his own unworthiness. He [compares himself to] no one else. He simply opens his unworthiness to divine mercy.”

He opens himself to God. And, my friends, *that* is the first and most important step to right relationship between God, self, and others: *opening* ourselves – our hearts, our minds, our wills – to God, in faith and trust and vulnerability. It is the beginning of all **true** prayer. The Pharisee, who is really **not** praying, but is talking to himself, does not need any change in his life, for he is already righteous and right! It’s that other person who *obviously* needs to change!

My friends, I don’t know about you, but I live like the Pharisee a good part of the time! Comfortable in where I am in life, thinking myself to be a pretty moral, upright, good person, I see no urgent need for me to make any significant changes in my life (and change and transformation is always what happens when one opens oneself to God in prayer!). But that *other* person? *They* **definitely** need a major overhaul in *their* life!

Yes, I often find myself very much like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable.

And yet, in my better moments, I can also be like the tax collector: open to God in humility and vulnerable prayer, willing – even eager! – to allow God to change me, transform me, more and more, into the likeness of Christ.

And so, my friends, I don't think we should interpret this parable in an "either-or" manner. Rather, we should see in ourselves both the Pharisee *and* the tax collector, a self-righteous self *and* a humble self, someone who does not need to change, and someone who is open and vulnerable and willing to have God come into our life and change everything, molding us more and more into the divine Image in which we were created, making us a "little Christ."

You have heard the following story, I am sure, but it bears repeating, since it is so relevant to today's Gospel.

An old Cherokee was teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside every human being," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil: he is anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, lies, and superiority. The other is good: he is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The fight between those two wolves is going on inside of me, inside of you – and inside every human being."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee replied, "The one you feed."

My friends, we each have a battle going on inside of us – a battle between a Pharisee who trusts in himself and regards others with contempt, and a tax collector who is aware of his sins and weaknesses and his dependence on God, and opens himself up to be changed by God's love, mercy, and Presence. Which of them will win the battle? Which of them will we feed?

AMEN

¹ All quotations in this sermon are from John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 294-300