

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: 20th Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 30/ Proper 25
Luke 18:9-14

23 October 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“Why God Liked the Bad Guy Better”

What a brilliant teacher Jesus was and what a sense of humor he had!

He tells the parable, “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector....”
The Pharisee’s prayer is filled with self-righteousness, the tax collector’s with humility,
and Jesus’ concluding words to his listeners are,

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted”.

And our natural human response is, “Yes, Jesus! Thank God we are NOT like that Pharisee!”

And then as Jesus begins to chuckle, we realize that he has just laid the perfect trap,
and we have stumbled in and been caught before we’ve even realized what has happened!

For as soon as we think, “Thank God we are not like that Pharisee!”, we realize that that is exactly what we are!

“The Pharisees stood in the front, apart from the others, and standing tall, head up, prayed a prayer
that had been written down & was straight out of the Jewish liturgy of the time.

Pharisees prayed prayers like these in the temple and on street corners, sometimes for several hours at a time.
In Jesus’s time, there was a saying that if only two men could be saved one of them would surely be a Pharisee.
What we need to realize is that at the time of Jesus, Pharisees were well respected.

It was only later, when Paul and the gospel writers
were trying to distance their Christian experience from the Hebrew tradition,
that the criticism of the Pharisees was inserted into scripture.

And this fear is he really was a good man.

He followed not only the written law of his people, but its centuries of interpretation.

The written law told Jews to fast one day a year; the Pharisee fasted two days a week.

The written law told Jews to tithe 1/10th of what they earned for the temple;

this Pharisee also tithed on everything he bought, in case the man who sold it to him had evaded the tax”.*

The Pharisee was the kind of member we would all want for our church.

He’d be here early for worship, early getting things set up, greeting people,
helping to lead worship, giving generously to the church, cleaning up after worship,
serving on committees and council, delivering food to the hungry,
giving generously of his time and talent and treasure.

Make no mistake, the Pharisee was a very good man.

And he was right about the tax collector, too.

He was as bad as man as the Pharisee was good.

“The Roman Empire, despite its vastness and despite all the business that had to get done,
had virtually no civil servants.

Instead, that work was *privatized*.

Every year Rome auctioned off contracts to build roads, excavate mines, feed legions, collect taxes.

The closer a people lived to Rome and Rome’s scrutiny, the fairer their tax rate.

The people of Palestine lived far from Rome,

so they routinely paid two and three times the legal rate, and they had no recourse.

The man and those above him – the army, courts, and governor – scooped up the surplus for personal profit
and made *fantastic* fortunes in the Middle East.

To add insult to injury, the people’s taxes *paid* for that army, courts, governor.

The tax system was subcontracted into a pyramid scheme of exploitation.

The man who organized the local pyramid used his inside knowledge of his own people against them
in the form of bribes & blackmail,

He handled unclean money, associated intimately with unclean gentiles,
and was so despicable, Jewish law forbade even a beggar to accept his charity”.*

Two men went up to the Temple to pray.

One was the *best* of his people; one was the *worst*.

One gave freely twice what the law commanded while one extorted twice what the law allowed.

Once fasted while one feasted.

One practiced abstinence while one indulged in greed and gluttony.

One's life was about pleasing God while the other's was about pleasing himself.

Now knowing all of that, which of those two characters do you want to be?

Well, I think all of us aspire to be the kind of person the Pharisee was, right?

None of us would like to be like the tax collector.

And yet Jesus said it is not the Pharisee, but the tax collector who prayed rightly.

Why?

Because prayer is about how we talk with God,

how we communicate with God, how we see ourselves in relationship with God.

Not only does the Pharisees prayer seem to put the Pharisee on an equal relationship with God,

it almost tries to claim one-upmanship on God.

“God you only asked for this much, but I’m giving you more.”

The Pharisee is so full of self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction

that there is no room to receive anything God has to offer.

It would appear that the Pharisee has no need of God.

And that's the danger for those of us

who are not marginalized or disenfranchised or oppressed by injustice in this society.

Of course there are always times in our lives when we need God.

There are times when things go wrong with our bodies and we need healing,

or when things go wrong with our relationships and we need reconciliation,

or when things go wrong with our finances and we need assistance.

But in between those times we can live in relative comfort and security and safety.

And like the Pharisee we can assume that we deserve those things because we live rightly.

Everyone has times when things go wrong and they need to turn to God for help –

when they get sick or when relationships are fractured or when they face a financial crisis. But for those

who are marginalized or disenfranchised or oppressed in our society,

there is never that in-between time where there is true comfort or security or safety,

and so there is never a time when there is not a need for mercy or justice,

there is never a time when there is not a need for God.

The truth of the matter, is that everyone of us is totally dependent upon God –

upon God's grace and mercy and loving-kindness.

Everything that we are is a gift.

Everything that we have is a gift.

Every moment that we are alive is a gift.

Every breath that we take as a gift.

Every joy and every sorrow is a gift.

Every success and every failure is a gift.

The less people have. the more dependent they are, the more they know their need of God,

then the easier it is to stand in right relationship with God,

and the more their prayers reflect the truth that every human being needs God.

But the more we have, the less dependent we are, the less we understand our need for God,

then the more difficult it is to stand in right relationship to God

and the less our prayers reflect the truth.

I have spent most of my life as the Pharisee,
trusting that if I just follow all that church and society and logic and common sense
has taught me, then things will eventually work out as they will.
But in the last 4 years I've learned that it's an entirely different thing to truly trust God.
It's an entirely different thing to look at situations that appear utterly hopeless to my human eyes
and still have hope and faith that God can turn such situations around.
It's an entirely different thing to stop trying to fix a situation right away by myself
and instead let go of it and give it to God and allow God to take care of it in God's own time.
The Pharisee is living his life rightly on the surface, but he is not standing in right relationship to God.
The tax collector is living his life wrongly on the surface,
but at least he knows where he stands in relationship to God.

And thus, both men are flawed. As are we.
Does God want us to live honorably and righteously? Of course.
But we cannot do that by simply setting out to do the things that WE think
are right and good and logical and practical.
Because that's what the Pharisee did.
It did not matter one hoot that he was doing good, even great things.
Those good things did not please God, because what God cares about is that relationship
in which we let go of all our lofty or practical goals and simply turn to God and say,
"What do YOU want me to do, God? What do YOU want us to do?"
And the answer to that question may not seem at all logical or practical or even doable,
but it's what we are called to do, it's what God desires that we do, and it's what God will empower us to do.
It's not that God wants us to live dishonorably or unrighteously, of course.
But if we are doing what GOD desires, what GOD thinks is best, what GOD asks us to do,
then we will get both things right –
both our inner relationship with God and our outer relationship with the world
We will have started in the right place, understanding with the tax collector
that God is God and we are not,
that God's ways are higher than our ways, and God's thoughts than our thoughts.
and that if we do exactly what God asks,
then our actions as well as our hearts will be pleasing to God.

It doesn't matter what good or great things we decide to do as a congregation
if we do not begin by getting our hearts right with God,
by submitting our wills to God's,
by trusting that God will enable us to do things that are impossible in our own power,
then God will not be pleased.
But if start by admitting that God is God and we are not,
if we listen to God and discern God's will,
and if we step out in faith, not knowing where we are going but trusting God to lead us,
then no matter what God calls us to do, God will give us all the resources to do it.

In the end it doesn't matter how many or how few good things we do –
because no matter what we do, we will sin and fall short of the glory of God.
What matters is that we come to God, not full of self-sufficiency and self-satisfactions,
but as empty vessels. ready to accept whatever God desires to give us.
What matters is that we come into God's presence with broken and contrite hearts, which God will not despise.
Today, may the thoughts of our minds, the mediations of our hearts, the words of our mouths,
& the actions of our bodies, be pleasing in your sight, O God, our Rock & our Redeemer. Amen

* <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/new-testament-luke-189-14-the-pharisee-and-the-tax-collector-sylvester/>