

Lectionary 30 Proper 25 C 16

October 23, 2016

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.
Amen.

Few of us are able to live our lives comfortably walking down the center of the path at all times, myself included. Most of the time we find ourselves in one ditch or the other, we get pushed or pulled by society, by our greed or envy, our over inflated or lack of self worth. I know that it happens to us and our families and within our communities and nation. We believe we are the main stream and wonder why others are not with us. When we get to extreme and people do not understand or agree with us, it tends to affect our relationships with others as well.

A Jewish theologian, Martin Buber observed that our spiritual natures have two pockets. He wrote; ‘when we reach into one pocket, we pull our smallness – we are nothing but dust and ashes.’ “Then in the other pocket however we extract greatness – for our sake the universe was created.”

This is the twofold nature of humanity, filling one pocket with a humbling stance as the Psalmist puts it, ‘who are humans that you, O God, are mindful of us.’ While the other pocket strains to contain the equal truth ‘God created humans a little lower than the angels.’

This is the struggle for us because we need both the self assured sense that we can accomplish anything we set our minds to along with the understanding that we can do nothing on our own. It is only with a shared sense of our interdependence on each other and in relationship with our God that all things are possible.

So why does it seem that life is easier to understand what we stand for only when it is in contrast to that which we disagree? Luke’s introduction to today’s parable alludes to this problem as he wrote ‘Jesus also told this

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parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.'

The parable begins; two men went to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. So right away we start aligning the introduction with the participants in the parable. Especially as Jesus continues; *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."*

The prayer of the Pharisee comes to our ears as arrogant and self serving. Yet if we are honest with ourselves, sometimes our prayers can sound very much like this prayer. 'Thank you O God, but for your grace I too would be..., then we go on to name the many things we are thankful we are not. Then there are our prayers where we list or tell God and others of all the things we have accomplished. We seek assurance and validation for all the 'good' things we have done.

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!" The tax collector is one who knows he struggles with doing that which is right, asking for God mercy believing God is with the other and that only God can act to forgive and justify him. Here we can find ourselves as well, stuck in a place believing it is beyond our ability to effect change. So we seek to lift ourselves up, to help us feel better about ourselves and to give us some self worth lifting up our accomplishment to God and others. These are all good reasons, but do they just take us from one ditch to the other or from one pocket to the other?

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Out of either pocket we tend to find ourselves not in proper relationship with our God or with others. In our arrogance and self righteousness we feel as if we do not need any one else. In our self loathing we feel as if no one is there for us or would want to be there with us.

I will be honest as I read the parable it sounded all too familiar in light of the election we will have in just over two weeks. While I am a fan of politics and enjoy watching and participating in the process, I am at the same time saddened by the way things are this year. Each side has really worked to divide and to segregate the country into two camps, Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, each trying to make one side or the other right and the other side wrong. In both parties I can hardly figure out what it is that they stand for or what it is they want to accomplish, because they have spent most of the time telling me why I should not trust or vote for the other candidate. I wonder how after all this hatred and vitriol we will be able come together to begin working for the common good of our country.

These kind of divisions are not regulated to just the political world. Between our Christian brothers and sisters we are often divided and separated into similar camps. I was proud of our campus ministry students who went to campus to stand against the hatred as a group came to campus to proclaim what they understand as the moralization of the gospel. Their understanding of the truth is an extreme that does not match where many others are in society. The two groups had competing truths as to what Jesus and the Gospel stands for. Even in the Christian community we differ as liberals divide the world between the just and the unjust, or the conservatives into the pure and the immoral. I like many of you fall into these traps wanting to be right instead of reaching out to those to whom I disagree.

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So what then can we do? For we more often find ourselves doing that which we do not want to do in acting like the Pharisee, allowing our self-righteousness to divide the world around us into the us and them camps. As Lutherans we understand and believe as Martin Luther puts it that we are both Saint and Sinner, both at the same time saved by God's grace even as we stand in need of God's forgiveness.

This parable is more of a reminder that we live this life of faith, not by our own ability but through the gift of faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. As in the prayer from Jeremiah this morning, 'Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us and we are called by your name, do not forsake us.' That we come like the tax collector seeking God's mercy and to be justified by God's grace.

When we are justified through God's gift of grace we are made right in our relationship with God and with each other. Out of this right and restored relationship with God and our neighbor we can find our shared sense of common purpose for God's church and the world which God created.

AMEN

T.G.B.T.G.

Pastor Michael

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus also 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.'

Psalm 8: 4-5

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.