

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Luke 18: 9-14 – The Tax Collector and the Pharisee in us

Listening to that Gospel passage, I wonder which of those two characters you most readily identify with. Is it the Pharisee or the tax collector?

Let's look first at the Pharisee. The word Pharisee has become a synonym for hypocrite, and we tend to write them off as the bad guys – after all, Jesus was given to criticising them. But the Pharisees were the ones that kept the Jewish faith alive under the oppressive forces of Roman occupation. They preserved Judaism by maintaining clarity about the way the goodness of God ought to shape all of life. When this man thanks God that he isn't thief, a rogue, an adulterer; that he fasts twice a week and gives away a tenth of all his income; he's telling it as it is. He almost certainly does lead a life blameless and good according to the Jewish law. He's nothing like the unsavoury character on the other side of the room.

Here we have the tax collector. He was a man despised, even hated by the people, and with good cause. He was an instrument of economic oppression by the Roman Empire. That made him a collaborator, and religiously unclean as well. The way the system operated meant that he was at the bottom of the empire's exploitation scheme. The Emperor made financial demands of the governors and kings under him – and they in turn made financial demands on regional officials, and so it went down the line to the tax collector, who was given a certain amount he had to collect. Anything he got above that was his income. It was a system that led inevitably to corruption and resentment. So, this character was on the wrong side: religiously, politically, and economically. And when he prays, beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" – he's telling it as it is.

Luke ends the story by telling us that the tax collector went to his home 'justified.' That means, he went home believing he had been made right with God – at peace with God. But how come? The Pharisee has it all figured out, and he's right about the kind of life he should live. He's faithful, dependable, loyal – he's the sort of person that we would probably grab to have on Vestry. He may also be the sort of person we would like to be in many ways – for he's certainly respected. But somehow, he's got it wrong, and those first listening to this story, would have been horrified to hear that – for this man *is* genuinely good.

Here's where the 'but' comes in... but his prayer is all about him. It's about his achievements, about the good and virtuous things that he's done. That's where he believes the source of life is – in his goodness. As I say that, I think of the times when I feel that my accomplishments, my good deeds, my self-sacrifices, have somehow earned me a gold star. I wonder if this rings a bell with you. There are moments when I (very discretely) give thanks that I've earned divine favour. But at those times the Pharisee in me misses the point... for we receive blessings from God, not because of things we've done, but as a free gift from God. It's what we call grace.

Now for the tax collector. I'm not over impressed by this man. There's no expression of real remorse. He's given no pledge to leave his employment or offer restitution to those he's cheated. There are no promises to lead a new and better life. Nothing, except – and this is the point – the simple acknowledgment that he's utterly and entirely dependent on God's mercy. The tax collector knows the one thing the Pharisee doesn't – his life – his past, present, and future is entirely dependent on God's grace – on God's loving, unearned, unearnable mercy and goodness.

The Pharisee focused on himself, but the tax collector realised that life came from God. The story of our lives isn't about us; it's about God. Our lives are about what God does for, and through, and in us.

The tax collector flings himself on the mercies of God and depends on God to do something in and with his life. If we come before God in humble openness, trusting in God's goodness, we make room for God to work in our lives. However, there's a trap which we can sometimes fall into. It's the trap of spending our lives being nothing but the miserable sinner; making our only prayer "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" It's the problem I have with the old Communion Service from *The Book of Common Prayer*. I felt we never got up off our knees and celebrated God's forgiveness and the new life we've been given. We seemed to spend the whole time grovelling before God, being a miserable sinner. And that keeps the focus on us, not on God. But it's not about us. It's about God. I'm not saying that we should shy away from our failings and our sins. But my experience of human life tells me that most people are more likely to fall for the sinner role than for the saint role. But we're all saint and sinner at the same time. There's a bit of the Pharisee in us, and there's a bit of the tax collector in us. That's what it is to be human and, it's what it means to be a beloved child of God.

To be fully human – to be fully alive – we need to shift our attention away from ourselves – away from our virtues and gifts – away from our failures and sin – and focus on God's infinite goodness and mercy – on God who delights in restoring, freeing, and forgiving.

It's all about our God who reaches out to us with unimaginable and unexpected grace. And that's the good news – that God's grace meets us where we are – not where we think we should be. It's grace that transforms us, not guilt, let alone our achievements. And it's grace that sends us out into the world, forgiven, renewed, and ready to live and serve as God's people.

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