

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 26, 2025 – 20 Pentecost
Luke 18:9-14
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The passage we just heard from Luke's Gospel is a lesson, a parable on humility. You have heard me speak often about humility, and that is because the teaching of scripture and the wisdom of Christian tradition emphasize its importance. Humility is a fundamental stance in relation to God in which we acknowledge that God is our Creator and we are God's creatures. This may sound simple – do any of us truly think we are the creators of ourselves much less of all life and the universe? I doubt it! But honest self-examination would, I think, show many of us that we live day to day as if we can depend upon ourselves and other people and leave God out of it all unless and until we or someone we care for deeply are in trouble. And it is even more likely that we forget that we owe God our lives because our lives and all the blessings of life are God's gracious gifts to us. As one of my favorite gospel songs puts it, in words to God, "I owe you me." To remember this is to orient ourselves to God in right relationship, with deep humility.

This morning's parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector teaches another theme we should be familiar with: pride and self-importance are obstacles in the way to the kingdom of God. The Pharisee is a good, sincerely religious man. There is no suggestion that he is a hypocrite. He does what a good Jew ought to do, tithing and fasting in obedience to the teaching of scripture. He is quite serious about his religious practice, to the point where it may have caused him discomfort and limited his actions. All this is commendable. But in this parable he uses his religious piety and practice to justify himself before God and to judge himself to be a better person than the tax collector.

The tax collector is quite a different sort of man from the Pharisee. Being a tax collector meant both that he was collaborating with the Romans who occupied Israel and that he made his own income by extorting money from the Jewish people, possibly using force to back up his demands. The people hearing Jesus would immediately understand that the tax collector was indeed a sinner who had much to confess to God. What they – and we – would not have expected was Jesus' teaching that the tax collector was closer to God than the Pharisee was.

If we want to put these characters in more contemporary terms for our culture, we might imagine the Pharisee to be a retired Episcopal bishop and the tax collector a guy who runs a protection racket. That way, when Jesus says that the second character was "justified" rather than the first character, when the thug is "right with God" and the bishop is not, we can be as offended as the original hearers might have been. But after we are finished being offended, we still have to decide what Jesus is trying to tell us.

Luke's Gospel, as I have said before, is remarkable for emphasizing the reversals we discover in God's kingdom compared to the world's kingdom. For example, in Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55) – "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Or in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Luke 14:7-14) and in today's parable – "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In today's parable we find the religious man further from God than the sinner because the religious man is proud of himself and the sinner is aware of and sorry for his shortcomings before God, whose mercy he desperately needs.

We must not read into this parable the idea that God does not care how we act, that it is as acceptable to be a person who exploits others as it is to be a person who gives generously and tries to live according to the ways of God. No one who reads the Bible with attention could think that God does not care about what we do and how we act. Nor could we think that Jesus doesn't care. In saying after saying, parable after parable, Jesus makes it clear that he cares passionately about what we do. But he cares for a particular reason: because how we act, over time and in many different situations, shapes who we are. If we consistently look to our own advantage, in any place, in any circumstance, and with any other people, we become closed and self-regarding persons who eventually will be unable to open ourselves to other people or to God. An "all about me" attitude chosen over a lifetime will lead us to a state of "nothing but me," which is perhaps a very good definition of hell.

God leaves the choices to us. If we don't offer God a way into our hearts, God will not force us. God offers grace to us, but if we will not receive God's grace, if we insist on justifying ourselves and criticizing and condemning others – as the Pharisee did in this parable – then God will not, cannot draw us close to God's heart.

This is why the tax collector is "justified:" in acknowledging his sin and his need for God's mercy, he has allowed God the opportunity to work with him, to enter his heart, to begin to turn his life around. Saying we are sorry to God is only a beginning. Changing the direction of our lives when we have strayed from the ways of God is also necessary.

We don't know the end of the story in this parable. Did the tax collector do the hard work of repentance and change? Did he trust God and God's judgment and mercy enough to put up with his self-righteous critics? Was he able to remain humble before God? None of this is easy, but there is hope for his salvation.

As religious people, church people, we must be on our guard against the Pharisee within us. It is a very real temptation to look at ourselves and how we support the church or do what Jesus commands us to do and think that we are better than others. It is certainly true that some behavior is better than other behavior; for example, it is better to give generously than to exploit people for our own gain. But we must not judge others' hearts and souls. This level of judgment belongs to God and only to God.

And so we come back to humility before God, and we see once again how challenging and important humility is. We believe that God is rightfully our judge and the judge of all people. We believe that only God knows all our hearts, our thoughts, our secrets, our temptations, our weaknesses. Only God knows how we have exercised the freedom of will that God has given us. Because only God understands and knows us thoroughly, only God can properly judge us. As humble creatures of God, can we leave the judgment to God and get on with our own proper work of repentance, prayer and love for God, our neighbors and ourselves? Can we do that? Much may depend on our choice! In Jesus' name. Amen.