

**St. Paul's Anglican Church
The 11th Sunday After Trinity
September 1, 2019
The Rev. Mr. Dennis Ryan**

Good morning, please be seated.

***For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that
humbleth himself shall be exalted.***

(Luke 18:14b)

When we started our series on the Sermon on the Mount seven weeks ago, we said that the Beatitudes and indeed the whole Sermon really was Jesus telling us how we could conform our wills to God's. Why do we want to conform our wills to God? Because doing so will allow us to eternally live the most abundant life possible and He knows that the most abundant life possible is with Him. Today we have moved from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of St. Matthew to the Gospel of St. Luke and one of the Traveling Narratives of Jesus. Specifically, today we read and are examining "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector." But even though we have moved from one book to another, the message remains remarkably consistent. I once took a class in which a student asked a question but didn't understand the teacher's answer to the question. The teacher then answered the question again not once but twice, each time using different language and examples until the student understood. In the same manner Jesus is a master communicator and exemplar reaching out with the same message told differently time and time again so that each of us can understand. If you think back to Fr. Thomas's sermon 4 weeks ago,

or even go to the St. Paul's website and reread it, you will see the similarities.

The first verse of today's Gospel tells us that this is a parable. Now a parable is simply a comparison but a comparison told in a manner that is engaging and interesting. Further, while the actual story itself may be fictional, the principles of the parable are true and eternal. This is no fairy tale but something we should take to heart and apply in our daily lives.

With this as background, it is appropriate to know to whom Jesus is relating this parable. It is to those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." They were part of the religious elite of the day and they were known as the habarim or associates, those who kept the religious law and tended to stay together apart from others. Conversely, the am-haaretz or "people of the land" were those who did not keep the religious law. Unless forced to, the habarim did not associate with the am-haaretz.

The parable begins, "Two men went up to the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, the other a publican." In Jesus' time, people went to the temple twice a day, once at dawn and once at 3 pm. Each time the priests would sacrifice animals to make atonement for the sins of the people. This then would have been one of those times and though they went to pray, which we generally associate with private devotion, it was also clearly a time of corporate worship. Publicans were tax collectors, who though were Jewish, were agents of Rome and therefore were probably considered lower on the social strata than even shepherds.

"The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself." By this it is meant that even though the Pharisee was in corporate worship he still set himself apart, like he was too good to be with the other

worshippers. It would be like as if one of us were to come into church and stand for the whole service between the front pew and the altar rail.

The Pharisee continues: “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.” Prayers, during this time, were to consist of either: “confessions of sin; thanks for bounty received, or petitions for oneself and for others.”¹ The Pharisee’s prayer contains none of any of these three elements and in fact sounds more like self-praise or exaltation. Notice also that he has really thrown down the gauntlet between he and the publican. Not one shred of “love others as you would love yourself” here.

Not only does he put down the publican but he goes on to say: “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.” Leviticus 23 only commands fasting one day a year, Pharisees now 2000 years later had assumed the practice of weekly fasting for one day but this Pharisee takes it to another level by fasting two days. Similarly, the tithe mentioned is like a sales tax on certain items but this Pharisee voluntarily pays the sales tax on everything he buys. It is like he is saying, “I know better than other Pharisees and even God, Himself, what ought to be done.”

Now we switch to the publican. “And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven.” The publican also separates himself from the congregation, but unlike the Pharisee who stands between the front pew and the altar rail, the publican almost doesn’t even come into the church but stands behind the last pew by the entrance door. Further: he “smote his breast,” this is something absolutely unheard of in middle eastern society, even to this day. Smiting or striking one’s breast was only

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *“Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes”*, pg. 347.

done by women and then only in times of deep distress or anguish. This action by the publican is a measure of the deep, profound emotion he is experiencing. The publican says; “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Remember we said that they went to the temple to make a sacrifice for atonement of sins. In saying be merciful, the publican is crying out loud for atonement or phonetically: at-one-ment. This publican, an am-haaretez, desperately wants to be at one with not only other people but even more importantly with his God. God has always meant us to be at one with him. It was only Adam in the Garden of Eden who made the choice to separate us from Him.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, a friend of Job’s, Eliphaz, is instructing Job on Yahweh’s abilities, particularly His ability to save and give hope. It is with this hope in mind that the publican, who knows that he is a sinner – one who has separated himself from God, is crying out for mercy to be made one with God.

The last verse of the parable begins with: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.” Justified is another word for to be made right with someone. Before we can have a fruitful relationship with one another, things must be right between us. Before we can be one with God we must be right with Him.

Christ summarizes the parable with the last half verse: “for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” The publican has acknowledged his true state before God and so is spiritually raised up. The Pharisee thinking he is spiritually secure has cut himself off from God totally.

It is interesting that the source within us of all of our love is our heart and yet the same heart is also the source of all evil that we may commit. What Christ is telling us today in this parable is that

relationship is a heart thing. In order to be made right with one another and God our hearts have to be right. We can be thankful at times that our hearts are not completely autonomous but the feelings and emotions within our hearts are also influenced by our actions and our thoughts. The three influence each other inseparably. As such we have a choice of what the state of our heart will be. Will it allow us to be justified or not? And if we are justified, as the Epistle today says, because “Christ died for our sins;” He is our hope. He is the promised atonement for us, once and for all times.

The publican was justified and granted mercy because his heart was focused outwardly towards God. Our challenge, beloved, is to do the same in every thought, word, and deed.

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion, and glory, both now and forevermore.

He that soweth little shall reap little; and he that soweth plenteously shall reap plenteously. Let every man do according as he is disposed in his heart, not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver.