

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

***"Faith and Mercy Go Hand In Hand"***

I got to thinking that in the second reading as Grant was reading talking about if you have people from Thessalonica they would be Thessalonians, right? And if you have people from Corinth they would be Corinthians. But there is a name in there that we don't read so much. People from Dalmatia. So, if you are from Dalmatia, what are you? You know – a Dalmatian! That is my sense of humor. What can I tell you. But keeping in that line...

A young woman went to her priest, Fr. O'Malley, and said, "Father, I have a sin that is eating away at me, and I want your help. I come to church on Sunday and I can't help thinking as I look around that I'm the prettiest girl in the whole congregation. I know I shouldn't think that, but just look around me, I can't help it. I want you to help me with this." The priest replied, "Mary, don't worry about it. In your case it's not a sin. It's just a horrible mistake!" My friends - life is not a contest!

It would seem to me that the Pharisee in the Temple compared his holiness and the Tax Collectors' as a contest – in which his prayer consisted of telling God about his worthiness and holiness and all of his good points while being critical and putting down that Tax Collector. Isn't it awesome that it is the faith of the Tax Collector that allows him to look directly into the heart of Almighty God and seeks His mercy through his true penitence!

The Pharisee was all about show and wanted everyone to know that he was obedient to the times of prayer that were scheduled daily to go with with the morning and evening sacrifices. But you know what – people could go to the Temple anytime for private prayer! Fasting was not commanded in the Law of Moses – except on the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees, wanting to try to be holy, fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. So, here was this proud Pharisee who wanted everyone to know that he was so obedient to the custom – and was doing more than the Law required. For him, it was all about the show!

Every word in the Pharisee's prayer is reeking with self-praise. Even the expression '*praying this to himself*' - did you catch that? That is significant. It suggests that the prayer was not so much addressed to God's ears than to his own, and his words could hardly be spoken directly to others, both because of their arrogant self-praise and of their disrespectful false accusation of everyone else in the world – for they appeared to sit in judgment. It was not prayer to God, but a monologue of his own praise, and it was equal parts exaltation of himself and the insulting of other men. I want to suggest to you that his "prayer" never went higher than the inner roof of the temple court, and was, in a very real sense, 'to himself alone.'

Meanwhile, on the other hand, the prayer of the Tax Collector or publican was totally different from the Pharisees'. He made no boasts about his own righteousness toward God or man. He felt and confessed that he was a sinner, and with true repentance, was willing to acknowledge it. I really believe that this is the kind of prayer that God finds most acceptable and truthful. When we are willing to confess and repent or turn away from our sins, we find God's mercy.

Just listen to these true words from Proverbs 28:13 – “*He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.*” The Tax Collector was willing to do this any place, and any time; in the presence of anyone; in the midst of the multitudes of the temple, or alone in his prayer closet. He knew in his heart that “the all knowing and ever present God” was a witness of his actions. Not only was God a witness to his repentance, but God was there when his sins were committed – even the ones he was most ashamed of, and because of that he was willing to confess his sins before Him. As Anglicans we don’t have to do this “publicly,” but we should be willing, always, to confess our transgressions to Almighty God – either during the public confession of the Holy Eucharist, to God alone in prayer, or if you feel the need – in the presence of a priest for the Reconciliation of the Penitent, so that we may receive forgiveness of those sins through God’s infinite goodness, love, and most importantly His mercy. In our service we have a time of Confession, and then the priest stands and pronounces absolution for your sins. When we have done wrong it is the most honorable thing for us to try to make amends. God does not want anyone burdened with sin – that is why He sent His son to die on the cross for us – and that invitation is open to everyone. The person who walks around with unrepented sin, who is not willing to confess it, walks around with an unnecessary burden attempting to “conceal” the fault, and so then adds hypocrisy to the list. We don’t ask you to stand up and declare exactly what you have done, but tell God, He knows. You don’t have to go into details – He knows and all you have to do is say Lord I am sorry! I messed up – He knows. He loves you so much He forgives you. And that is the truth.

In verse 13 of today’s Holy Gospel from Luke – the verb that is used here asking for God to be merciful (*ἱλάσκομαι hilaskomai*) means to make reconciliation. The Tax Collector was pleading for God’s mercy for his sins and fully believed that God could and would forgive him. This word referred to the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies; he was confessing his sin and his true need for forgiveness. How wonderful that we don’t need to have a *mercy seat* because we have a cross on which Christ’s blood was shed for our forgiveness. This Tax Collector was trusting in the blood that had been sprinkled on the mercy-seat for atonement. This repentant faith was more than enough and Jesus said that “*this man went down to his house justified*” before God (Luke 18:14). The Pharisee, on the other hand, who prayed “to himself,” rather than to God, was simply congratulating himself on his own self-righteousness, and so he received no forgiveness. If nothing else, he was filled with the sin of pride, perhaps the worst sin of all.

I just love these sayings, “The best remedy for conceit is to sit down and make a list of all the things you don’t know.” “You don’t have to be much of a musician to toot your own horn.” “People who sing their own praises do so *without* accompaniment.” And “You cannot spell sin or pride without *I* being in the middle.”

Jesus was very clear about people wearing their pride and self-righteousness on their sleeves, looking down at others and proclaiming to others that they are the ones that have it right – and that everyone else needs to get with their program. In Matthew 7 Jesus tells the crowd “*Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own*

*eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*" (Matthew 7:3-5) Anyone who thinks that Jesus does not have a sense of humor – read that again! We need to do our own self inspection before we question the righteousness of others – we need to do a “checkup from the neck up!” We need to do a self inventory about our righteousness, our holiness compared to God’s. How humbling is that? This Pharisee was putting on a show for the others and proclaiming that he was grateful, absolutely grateful, that he was not like others, when in fact he was probably worse than the others – because of his self-righteousness. He gave thanksgiving to God – but let me ask you - was that gratitude? I don’t think so. He proclaimed his excellences that he has performed – but where is the humility? We once again visit the church of “I, Me, Mine!” This Pharisee had his own pew – right up front in the Church of “I, Me, Mine!” It is all about Me. For the Tax Collector there was wholehearted remorse—but not despair. He never lost hope. There was an appeal to God’s mercy. This quote was taken from the magazine “*Guideposts*” “God wisely designed the human body so that we can neither pat our own backs nor kick ourselves too easily.”

Let’s not lose sight of the fact that the Pharisee was a pious and holy man, living, for all we can tell, an honest and upright life. He did more than the law required. He gave tithes, or ten percent of all his income and not just of the required parts. But he *stood up* in a prominent place to pray, and he commended himself for his piety (his prayer is all about ‘I’), he despised his neighbors and he suggested to Almighty God that there was nothing that he needed. On the other hand, the Tax Collector was so humble that he did not dare lift up his eyes, let alone his hands, to God in prayer, but simply poured out a confession from his heart of his sinfulness and appealed for God’s mercy. It is often said that Mercy is not getting what you deserve. God gives you what you don’t deserve and that is Mercy. Jesus’ verdict was that he went home *justified*, accepted by God, but the Pharisee was not accepted at all. God is always ready to receive the unrighteous when they call to him in faith, but He closes His ears to those whose pride in their religious practices and good works makes them feel self-sufficient.

There were certainly many good, well-meaning Pharisees, and therefore it is wrong to lump them all together and condemn them. But it is also true that there were people just like the Pharisee that Jesus spoke about, and they probably prayed prayers very similar to his.

Jesus wants all of us to be *childlike* but NOT *childish*. An unspoiled child illustrates humility, faith, and dependence. A child has a sense of wonder that makes life new and exciting. The only way to enter God’s kingdom is to become like a child and be born again (Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3). If the proud Pharisee had only become like a child, he too would have gone home justified. If he had had the faith, like a child – he would have received God’s mercy. Faith and Mercy go hand in hand! However, faith does not need us to “do anything” to be saved – except believe! Faith is “trusting in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all things and in all circumstances.” The Apostle Paul wrote to the people of Ephesus – and he wrote to us today:

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost - October 23, 2022, Year C

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In closing, I want to share with you what was my graduating class from Trinity School for Ministry Class of 2005 special Scripture verse - which I think contains all of our “marching orders” taken from the Prophet Micah: *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8) Faith and Mercy go hand in hand! Thank you Jesus.