

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

“Mercy”

In spite of what we are seeing on every TV - life is not a contest! Not an election and not a contest. It would seem to me in today's Holy Gospel Jesus was saying that the Pharisee in the Temple compared his holiness and the Tax Collectors' as a contest – in which his prayer is all about telling God about his worthiness, his holiness and all of his good points while being critical and putting down the Tax Collector. I think that it is awesome that it's the faith of the Tax Collector that allows him to look directly into the heart of Almighty God and seeks His mercy through true penitence!

Meanwhile the Pharisee was all about show and wanted everyone to know how he was obedient to the periods of prayer that were scheduled for him, daily to go 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 Mosaic Law – except on the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees, wanting to try to be as holy as they could be seen, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. Here was this proud Pharisee who wanted everyone to know that he was obedient to the custom – and he was doing more than the Law required. For him it was all about the show!

Every word in this Pharisee's prayer is reeking with self-praise. My Dad used to tell me, and I believe he was a wise man, he used to say “S P S” - Self Praise Stinks! Try to remember that. My Mom always said ‘to thine own self be true.’ I think S P S are good letters to live by. In today's Gospel I think that Jesus said that this man ‘*prayed about himself*’ is significant. It suggests that the prayer was less 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 a prayer to God, but a monologue of his own praise, and, if you will, it was just as much his personal exaltation as it was the insulting of other people. 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 grave sense, ‘to himself alone.’

On the other hand the prayer of the Tax Collector or publican was totally different from the Pharisee'. He made no boasts about his own self-righteousness toward God or man. He felt and proclaimed that he was a sinner, and with true remorse, was willing to acknowledge it – not just personally but publicly. I really believe that this is the kind of prayer that God finds acceptable and truthful. When we are willing to confess and repent or turn away from our sins, we find God's mercy. Listen to these true words from Proverbs 28:13 – “*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.*” Let's stop right there: do you know what mercy means? Mercy means not getting what you deserve. Plain and simple – mercy – not getting what you deserve. The Tax Collector was willing to do this in any place – especially in the Temple; in the presence of any one; 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 witness to his repentance, (and

here is the tough part) but God was present when his sins were committed. That is hard for people to really grasp sometimes— we think that we can hide our sins – that if we don't talk about them He won't know. He was there – and especially even the ones we are 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 many transgressions to Almighty God – either during the public confession of the Holy Eucharist that we will pray in just a little while, or if you feel the need to God alone in prayer, or possibly – 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 mercy – and absolution. There is a saying that we were talking about in our Confirmation Class – All May, Some Should, None Must – and that is very Anglican. When we have done wrong it is the most honorable thing for us to try to make amends. God wants to provide His love and forgiveness to every person who repents. God does not want anyone burdened with sin. (yes, I said that word – sin -the word that people are trying to edit out of readings in churches – and believing that there is no consequence to sin – there is!) That is why Jesus, the Son of God was sent 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 then adds hypocrisy to the list.

In verse 13 of today's Holy Gospel from Luke – the verb that is used here is asking for God to be merciful (*ἱλάσκομαι* *hilaskomai*) –asking for mercy. The Tax Collector was pleading for God's mercy for his sins and in turn fully believed that God would hear him and would forgive him. What does 2 Chronicles 7:14 say? *“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”* The Tax Collector was pleading to humble himself before God, asking for mercy, and in turn once again believed that God would hear him and would heal him from his sins. The word referring to mercy brings to mind 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 a *mercy seat* – we don't need to have sacrificial blood poured on the mercy seat once a year on the Day of Atonement - we have a cross on which Christ's blood was shed for our forgiveness – once for all. 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 home justified before God.”* (Luke 18:14) This means that he was “declared righteous” before God. The Pharisee, on the other hand, who prayed “about himself – or to himself” rather than God, was simply congratulating himself on his own self-righteousness, and therefore he received no forgiveness at all. If nothing else, he was filled with the sin of pride—perhaps the worst sin of all.

The late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once said “The proud man counts his newspaper clippings—the humble man his blessings.” This made me look for other's opinions on self-praise and pride and I found these illustrations:

- “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.”

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- “People who sing their own praises do so *without* accompaniment.”
- “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. Be careful of that! In Matthew 7 Jesus tells the crowd “*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*” (Matthew 7:3-5) We all need to do our own self inspection before we begin to question the righteousness of others – we need to do a “checkup from the neck up!” We need to do a self-inventory about our own righteousness, our own 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 that he was not like others, when in fact he was probably worse than all the others put together – because of his own self-righteousness. He gave thanksgiving to God – but let me ask you - was it really gratitude? He proclaimed his excellences that he has performed – but where is the humility? I believe this Pharisee was a member of the church of “I, Me, Mine!” This Pharisee had his own pew – right up front in the Church of “I, Me, Mine!” For the Tax Collector there is wholehearted remorse—but not despair. He never lost hope. There is an appeal to God for His 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 of all his income and not just of the required parts. But he *stood up* in a prominent place to pray, 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 of his sinfulness and appealed for God’s 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 toH in FAITH, but He closes His ears to those whose pride in their religious practices and good works makes them feel self-sufficient.

There is no doubt that there were probably many good, well-meaning Pharisees, and therefore it is wrong to lump them all together and condemn them all. 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.

The common denominator that Jesus reminds us of is faith. The definition of faith is: “*trusting in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all things and in all circumstances.*” How many

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times have we read in the Gospels of Jesus telling people “*your faith has healed you*” or “*your faith has made you well?*”

I am reminded of the account of the man who couldn’t get in the house to meet with Jesus. *"And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."* (Mark 2:3-5) The man, because of his faith and the faith of his friends, took up his mat that day and by the grace of Almighty God – he walked. Jesus affirms that prayers are indeed answered.

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. There are folks in here that well know how children react. The only way to enter God’s kingdom is to become like a child and be born again (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, God’s love and God’s forgiveness. Remember -Faith and Mercy go hand in hand! However – faith does not require us to “do anything” to be saved – except believe! What was that definition of faith again? 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: “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In closing, I want to share with you what for me is a special Scripture verse - taken from the Prophet Micah – that I believe gives us all our marching orders: “*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*” (Micah 6:8) Indeed - Faith and Mercy go hand in hand! Thank you Jesus!