

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA:

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 18: 9-14

“Love, Mercy and Forgiveness”

I find myself struggling every time I hear this Gospel message. The Pharisee in the Temple in his ‘prayer’, was telling God all about his own good points, and then He ends up exalting himself by simply putting down the tax-collector. The tax-collector, however, is the one whose very small faith is seeking the very heart of God and he casts himself on the divine mercy of Almighty God. Jesus reveals for us what God the Father would say about this: the tax-collector, not the Pharisee, would ultimately be vindicated – and his faith validated. What a powerful statement about what, as the Apostle Paul would say, is ‘justification by faith.’ I have been reminding our Wednesday night crew that to be justified is to be validated. You know, when you stay in a hotel and you out your car in their parking lot – you take a ticket – which you bring to the front desk so that they can validate it – so that when you leave you don’t have to pay. Validation, Justification, – you are set right with God. Let me take it a step further, God’s chosen people will be vindicated after their life of suffering holiness and service. Though enemies outside and inside may denounce and attack them, God will act and show that they truly are His people. Now wait a minute – you are going to say – ‘am I talking only about the Jewish people?’ Romans 11 tells you plainly that we are ‘grafted in’ to the nation of Abraham, through the root of Jesse. So when we talk about God’s chosen people – we are talking about God’s Chosen People – the ones who answer John 3:16 saying yes, Lord, I love you and I follow you. But this doesn’t mean that a person can tell in the present day who God’s elect are. That becomes a real issue. People go into certain Scriptures and say – oh, the elect – there is a certain number that God is allowing into heaven, and I say ‘balderdash!’ The ‘elect’ are the people who answer God’s call. The Elect were everyone. “God so loved?” Just this side? Or just this side? Or only the people in First Baptist? “God so loved the WORLD, that He sent His only Son” to give of Himself on the cross for us, and “whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” That my friends, they are the elect – the ones who say yes, Lord I believe. I want you to understand that. If you want to see where this vindication is, look for where there is genuine penitence, repentance and genuine casting of oneself on the mercies of God. Jesus told them, *"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Luke 18:14) I think that those are among the most comforting words in the whole Gospel.

In today’s Holy Gospel, I think that what Jesus said about this man who *‘prayed about himself’* is significant. I want to suggest to you that his prayer was less addressed to God’s ears than to his very own, and possibly for the ears of those around him. If you remember, just a few weeks ago I told you about my father giving me to always carry with me, three little letters - ‘SPS’ – ‘self-praise stinks.’ This Pharisee’s words were full of arrogant self-praise and of disrespectful false accusation of everyone else in the world. You know – “I am so glad I am not like that tax collector!” It was as if he was sitting in judgment, and you know what God says about judgement. 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

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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.’ SPS to be sure!

Then on the other hand, we have the prayer of the Tax Collector, which was totally different from the Pharisee.’ He made no boasts about his own self-righteousness toward God or other people. He felt and humbly proclaimed that he was a sinner, and with true remorse, acknowledging 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.”* I love that word – MERCY. Mercy means not getting what you deserve. Boy, do we deserve a whole bunch, don’t we? By God’s mercy – we don’t get it. 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 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 witness to his repentance, but we always need to remember that God was present when our sins are committed. That is kind of 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. The fact is that God was there. People tend to think that they can push under the rug the ones that they are most ashamed of. This man displayed great humility and courage because he was willing to confess his sinful nature before God. 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, speak to God alone in prayer, or possibly even in the presence of a priest following the form of the Reconciliation of the Penitent, on pages 223 and 224 of our Anglican Book of Common Prayer. I want to add that the last words of the priest in that personal time of forgiveness are, “Go in peace, and pray for me, a sinner.” We are all of a sinful nature and we must always remember that no one is the only sinner in the world – we are all sinners! We need to remember that we all may receive forgiveness of our sins through God’s infinite goodness, love, and mercy – and absolution. There is a very important saying that we should remember – “All May, Some Should, None Must” – and that my friends is very Anglican. It also pertains to blessing or ‘crossing’ yourself in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, or confession, or even coming to Holy Communion. “All May, Some Should, None Must.” We are not a people of ‘ya gotta do it this way!’ We offer it – and all may, some should, none must.

When we have done wrong it is the most humbling and honorable thing for us to try to make amends. God wants to provide His love and forgiveness to every single person who repents. Remember the offer? “God so loved the world.” That is still out there, by the way. God does not want anyone burdened with sin; that is why Jesus, the Son of God was sent to die on the cross for us – and that invitation remains open to everyone, until; there is no more time, either in our life or in the life of the world. 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.

I want you to hear these words from 2 Chronicles 7:14, “*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* – remember the Temple Veil was torn in two – when Jesus took His last breath, and that Temple Veil was torn in two, the Holy Spirit became accessible to everyone, who is in Christ Jesus. We don’t have sacrificial blood poured on the mercy seat once a year on the Day of Atonement - we have a cross on which Jesus’ blood was shed for our forgiveness – once for all. It doesn’t happen over and over and over again. That was done once. The only sacrifice that takes place in this church, and in all Anglican churches at the altar, is we become a ‘living sacrifice’ to God (ourselves, our souls and bodies.) 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, justified, and validated before Almighty God. The Pharisee, on the other hand, who prayed “about himself – or rather to himself” instead of God, was simply congratulating himself on his own self-righteousness, and because of that he received no forgiveness at all. If nothing else, he was filled with the sin of pride—perhaps the worst sin of all.

I believe that it is very important for each one of us to hold onto these precious words that the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:1-2, “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*” Being ‘in Christ Jesus’ means to be in relationship with Him, seeking His love, His mercy and His forgiveness.