

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22

Psalms 84:1-7

II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

10/23/2022

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

9[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:10“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

**You Don't Know the Half of It**

Good morning! We're jumping right in this week. And like the previous few Sundays, our lesson picks up right where we left off last week. Our scripture today is often treated together with last week's text, offering two parables on prayer offered in one lesson. So, something about the parable of the persistent widow and today's text on the Pharisee and tax collector are seen as complementary, or at least related.

I'm increasingly becoming more and more convinced that in order for our scripture to dwell within us, we need to read it more frequently. So, here's the Gospel lesson again, but courtesy of the The New English Translation: ***18:9** Jesus also told this parable to some who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else. **18:10** "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **18:11** The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: extortionists, unrighteous people, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. **18:12** I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.' **18:13** The tax collector, however, stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!' **18:14** I tell you that this man went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

It's a good story. One that, just like last week, seems to suggest a meaning right away. After hearing it we assume that the lesson is simple, that we are to be like the tax collector, and not like the pharisee. Francisco J. Garcia writes that *"At face value, the parable is written so that we will be drawn to identify with the tax collector due to his demonstration of*

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:9-14 NET

*humility (Luke 18:13), as opposed to the Pharisee who displays a sense of moral superiority (18:14). Be humble like the tax collector, and don't be haughty like that Pharisee, and you'll be justified before God. Simple, right? There are many problems with this traditional interpretation... it lead[s] us to commit the same offense that the parable is teaching against, as we thank God that we're not like that Pharisee."*<sup>2</sup>

Ouch! We walked right into that one didn't we! But that sort of interpretation does exactly the thing that the text is warning us against. It also leads us down a dangerous road, in painting the Pharisees as the bad people. This has always infuriated me. It does harm by portraying the Jewish audience as "bad," all the while forgetting that the tax collector is Jewish too! Readers can often lump Pharisees and Jews together, giving them both a negative judgment.

The Pharisees were a group of religious believers that made up a portion of the larger Jewish population. They were known for being traveling teachers, and after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70ce it was these same Pharisees that took up the pieces and helped the Jewish faith continue. It is from those same roaming teachers that our modern understanding of a Rabbi comes from. The Pharisees, like most groups, were unified only in their attempt to deepen their faith and respect for God in a way that they saw fit. But those ways didn't always match, and so no one Pharisee spoke for another. In fact, one could probably argue that Jesus was a Pharisee too.

As Jesus tells the story he intentionally uses extreme examples. On the one hand we have a Pharisee who is doing it all "right," he fasts, tithes,

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-5>

and follows all the rules. One the other we have a tax collector, quite possibly the most hated person. They were traitors, Jews who worked for the Roman Empire, collecting tax for the war machine that killed anyone who stuck a foot out. The tax collector determined how much they made by adding to the cut that you would give to Rome. And so it wasn't uncommon for tax collectors to be greedy, lining their own pockets.

And so Jesus presents two extremes. But you know what I find interesting? Well I'm glad you asked! In both of the characters in our story we are shown that their thoughts are surprising and unique. We don't know what's really going on inside a person's mind, and so who are we to make assumptions? In undergrad, one of the Jesuit priests would often tell us something incredibly simple and yet incredibly profound. *"You don't know the half of it,"* Father Harry would say. His point was that regardless of what you think about a person, you have no idea what's really going on. That person with a smile who always laughs may be fighting extreme depression, while the person with a sad look on their face is overjoyed at some news they just received. *"You don't know the half of it."*

It's a good motto for summarizing this text because it calls on us to do two things. The first is that we stop comparing ourselves superficially or irresponsibly. Instead, we can focus on our own spiritual journey with God, not using others as a measuring stick for something unique and wholly individual. The second thing is nuanced, and possibly even more important. It forces us to CARE for the person next to us. Instead of judging their mistakes, or worryingly comparing our own to their "success," we are set free to try and learn more about those around us! If we truly don't know all that's going on, this text invites us to stop measuring faith and instead

experience the relationships that God has put in front of us. It's only in sharing together that we can actually grow!

And if, as I argued in the beginning of this sermon, it's connected to the parable of the persistent widow last week, we can glean that this is work that takes time, effort, and yes, persistence. The effort we put into loving and knowing a person becomes a tool in our relationship with God. We grow together, within ourselves, with one another, and with the holy Three-In-One, united together, bound and called to change the world. Amen.