

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen,

So, Jesus is telling a parable, a story, and it's an instructional, but fictitious story, a story of two men in the temple and how they displayed their relationships with God. Now, while it might be fiction, it may well be based on something Jesus has actually observed, something he has seen there in church. The one man, a Pharisee, demonstrates his relationship to God through the religion he practices. The other man, a tax-collector, demonstrates his relationship with God through his faith in God's forgiveness. But, according to Jesus, only one of them is actually in right relationship with God Almighty, and it's not the one who is most religious, it is the one who is less religious and simply more full of faith. Luke remembers Jesus saying: I 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." His audience, those who were following him around and catching probably little snippets and soundbites of his teachings, must have thought it odd, though maybe somehow refreshing, that the religious elitist, this Pharisee, would not be exalted, but that the repentant sinner would.

In the framework of that 1st century Jewish culture, the Pharisees were indeed religious. True, they apparently often harassed Jesus, but think of it...here was a common carpenter from the outback of Nazareth who made audacious claims contrary to religious doctrine. I'm sure they thought they were doing the right thing. Pharisees considered themselves the keepers of religious doctrine, the keepers of the faith, the ones who could discern whether or not the people were following the accepted path to salvation. And I expect that they weren't just harassing Jesus, but anyone who seemed to be providing non-traditional insights into God's intentions. Aside from just following the rules, the doctrine, of their religion, the traditions handed down from the time of Moses, they believed that they knew God's intentions behind those laws, those teachings. It was the chosen duty, I expect, of the Pharisees to confront various heresies which became popular, and the Jesus movement was a very popular one which demanded scrutiny. The Pharisees thought that they were standing firm against all manner of religious deviancy, and that they were maybe the only ones who cared enough to do it.

But what they seemed to be lacking, in Jesus' time, was humility. Their doctrine had gotten the better of them. Their strict adherence to the laws and teachings had clouded their ability to reflect on the deeper meaning of God's dream. Mind you, Jesus never said "don't be a Pharisee", but rather "don't be like the Pharisees, those Pharisees who are elitist and think they know better than you". For the Pharisees, God bless them, only wanted to keep the faith pure, to be in the kind of relationship with God which was prescribed by their religion. And certainly, part of that was to be thankful. The Pharisee in today's reading tells God that he is thankful that he is not like rogues and thieves. Does this not show thankfulness to God, who creates all opportunities from which we are to choose? Is not this thankfulness a good thing? The Pharisee has, apparently, made good choices, has chosen well, from among his opportunities. Shouldn't he be thankful? Now, let's be honest: When you get a good parking space, don't you say a little "Thank you, God"? I always do. Is it wrong to thank God for that opportunity? And when I overhear some conversation in a restaurant or a store, I often say, "Thank you God, that I'm not married to *that* woman!" It's a little like the Pharisee who thanks God that he is not like a rogue or a thief, or even a tax collector. And, I must tell you, everyday I thank God that John Reinhardt and Peter Dwyer commended me to be hired by this parish! I look around at my fellow clergypersons and think that I am so blessed to be here instead of at some other church. But what may be missing (I hope not) is that within my thankfulness for my advantage is a compassion for those who have not been so fortunate. I shouldn't be thinking that those who have to park further away are just poor schmucks, or that those who are not lucky enough to be married to Gale deserve what they have got, or that those who have been destined to serve complicated parishes are to be pitied. I should be praying for them; I should be wishing them the best; I should be humble, not triumphant; I should be compassionate, not dismissive.

So, what about the Tax-collector? By the career choices he has made, he has given-up his religion. By being the collector of tribute to a foreign power, the oppressive Romans, he has betrayed the religion of his homeland, his religious culture. He has earned his living by inflating the taxes he collects from his neighbors so there is something left over for him and his family. And he knows the sin of his waywardness. He knows the guilt that his participation in this arrangement has

earned him. Now, what particular guiltiness has brought him to the temple today in Jesus' story, we don't know, but it is enough for him to be distraught, to be repentant of his mistakes. These mistakes likely had a devastating effect on those from whom he has taken money. They were probably unfair, unjust, and caused hardship for his neighbors. The guilt has brought him to the end of his rope; it has made him, he thinks, not only unfaithful to his religion, but also unfaithful to his faith, his relationship with God. He has taken away the hope of his neighbors. In his chosen profession, he has worked against God's dream, and today he comes before God with no hope himself, except that God might have mercy on him. That God might just forgive him. He is authentic in his prayer; he is genuine in his sorrow and embarrassment; he is now faithful in his relationship to God. And he is granted mercy.

That his attitude is justified by God, according to Jesus, is a theological revelation; to be this repentant, to be this upset about the choices one has made, opens a door to God's presence. When we get to this point, certainly when we hit bottom, we are truly available to receive God's grace. The Pharisee in this parable, on the other hand, comes with only religion and leaves with only religion. Not relationship. Yet Jesus never says "don't be a Pharisee"; He only says, "don't be like *this* Pharisee". Don't be like the ignorant Pharisee, who thinks he is justified by his religious activity and commitment, without recognizing the faith that should be religion's foundation. Without understanding that it is a dynamic relationship with God which is the basis of everything. When we pray, when we connect with God's creative, redeeming, and sustaining power, we should express our hope to be in love with God and our neighbors. And the intent of our prayer should have some tangible expression, don't you think? Like, for example, when our guests arrive today for our Harvest Dinner; may we welcome them with the radiance of God's Spirit, in the humble recognition that we are *so* blessed to have them here!

Two people come to the temple in this parable, both coming to be in the presence of God. The Pharisee comes with self-satisfaction, believing that his devotion to the principles and doctrine of his religion make him the best that he can be. The other, the tax-collector, comes with a genuine understanding that he is not. Jesus uses this teaching moment to share what God wants. God hopes that we can think outside the box, and realize that authenticity helps us to be our best selves. If we have selected certain choices in our lives, then we need to be accountable for those selections, good or bad, faithful or not. God forgives. God forgives when we are able to be genuine in our relationships. When we aren't, then we haven't made room for forgiveness; we don't allow God's forgiving nature to have an impact on us. Our loss. Our bad.

In June of 1966, when I was 17 years old, I was being mentored before being shuffled off to Germany for a year as an exchange student, and I was given a piece of wisdom which I have cherished ever since: Don't be intentionally judgmental. Remember that the people you meet have a different context for their opinions, and that your perspective may come from a different context. At that time, Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara were preparing to send another 150 thousand troops into Vietnam and Martin Luther King was calling for all people to be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. I took this piece of wisdom to mean that I shouldn't judge the Germans for their ignorance and short-sightedness. But, meanwhile, the Germans I met in my classroom and on the public street were, in fact, judgmental about the American mindset. What were we thinking, they said, that black citizens were deprived of basic rights and that we should interfere with Vietnamese self-determination? Each time, and often, when I encountered such criticism, I felt like saying "Yeah, I'm looking around, and where are all the Jews?" Thankfully, I stopped myself each time. Fact is, being judgmental doesn't move the conversation forward.

I'm not saying that, when it comes to public policy, we should keep our mouths shut; it is the privilege and obligation of all citizens to speak their minds. But being arrogantly judgmental doesn't help. It is not an appropriate response to the question "What is the faithful thing to do?" Imagine, in Jesus' story about this Pharisee and the soul-sick tax collector if the two might have engaged in conversation, even a conversation about God and divine forgiveness. And a conversation without judgmentalism. Would that have improved their lives? Would that have improved their faith? Would that have improved their religious and civic societies? Would it have influenced their prayer intentions? Would it have brought them together in some unexpected and helpful way? Wouldn't this be what Jesus would have really wanted? So, as we continue to build relationships and have conversations outside these lovely walls, I encourage you to defer judgment as long as you can, being reminded that judgement belongs to God alone, and in hope of living together in respect and dignity. Amen