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Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL

In Nomine+

We are called, today, to consider what is, perhaps, one of Jesus' better known parables, "The Publican Praying in the Temple." That's the way I first heard it identified at least 70 years ago as a Sunday school lesson at Saint Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church in Eplyanna, Illinois. Don't try to find that town on a map, by the way. It ceased to be a real town in the last third of the nineteenth century when the Milwaukee Railroad bypassed it in quest of cheaper land and a less challenging grade. But, it's still there if you know where to look. I still remember with great clarity, the teacher, Mrs. Alta Meier, who just happened to be my great aunt, enlightening us with the revelation that the Publican's prayer was answered and his sins forgiven because he was not a braggart, and was really, really sorry for taking other people's money. Simplistic, I know, but I'm not so sure that familiarity doesn't lead us to the same, or a similar conclusion, today.

The parable, itself, is fairly straight forward. What's surprising to us and must have been truly alarming to the disciples whom Jesus is trying to instruct, is the complete reversal that occurs in his conclusion. What could he have been thinking?

Pharisees were party within second temple Judaism who read and acted on what they read in the Law of Moses. They sought to be true to every statute and ordinance that had been handed down by sages and rabbis from antiquity. That, on any number of occasions, Jesus is found disputing with the Pharisees, does not make them bad people. It is invariably because Jesus' interpretation of the law is at variance with their traditional interpretations, and his revelations seem to them to be threatening to good order and perceived righteousness. It must be said, that on the whole, Pharisees were upstanding citizens and worthy of respect in every way. If there were an equivalent Christian sect, we would want them in the Church, leading our classes, organizing our outreach, expanding the resources of the treasury and improving the social standing of our coffee hour.

Our Pharisee in today's parable is an upstanding and righteous individual. His prayer is a prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving, not unlike one might find expressed in any number of Psalms. He has been blessed. His striving for righteousness before the law has really paid off. He does more than fulfill the requirements: He fasts twice a week, when once would certainly pass anyone scrutiny. He tithes all that he has in support of the temple, much more than is required. It's the equivalent of tithing your gross income instead of your adjusted gross. So far he is exemplary! It's when he starts to compare himself with others that he runs afoul of his own code. He has switched from righteous thanksgiving to self-righteous exceptionalism.

The Publican/tax collector is quite the opposite. He was a member of a despised class, and although he may have been very rich, had no social standing whatsoever. The tax collectors were collaborators with the hated Roman overlords. As the Romans levied taxes on their subjugated people, they farmed out the actual collection of these taxes to local agents. A fairly sophisticated system of corruption ensued, whereby these agents added their own fees which they exacted from the taxed. There was a hierarchy among agents so that those closest to the top made enormous sums of money, while those at the lowest levels made sure that they also enjoyed a prosperous existence. The social cost of this arrangement put tax collectors at the lowest level of society. They were called traitors, usurers, cheats, vermin. Rabbinic teaching ranked them as robbers and thieves. They could not hold any community office or give testimony in a Jewish court. They were banned from the synagogue. They were shunned by everyone, and it was even said that it was O.K. to deceive and mislead them to order to protect personal assets. One source said that the

closest modern equivalent would be present-day Mafiosi. It was a high price to pay for material success.

So it is this kind of person who was standing “far off” bowed and humbled who, inexplicably is seen praying for mercy. What is unclear and forever a mystery is why he has come to the temple to make this plea, and to Jesus, it seems irrelevant. It is his sincerity and his humility that capture Jesus’ attention and generate this teaching moment for his disciples. These virtues are what bring about his ultimate justification.

Justification is a word worth examining. Its root, of course, is just or justice, and in the biblical sense, that is the purview of God, and God alone. God alone is totally just, and He alone is the moral standard and corrective for injustice. To be justified, then, is to be made right with God. Corollary words might include vindication, forgiveness or even deliverance. To say that the tax collector has been justified means that he has been brought into a just state with God who is the unchallenged and indisputable judge. A divine and holy state, indeed!

Getting back to our Pharisee, we find, upon closer examination that God’s justice, or achieving the blessed state of justification is not on his mind at all. Rather, he is more than content to simply enumerate his accomplishments with no reference to God! He’s doing all the things that are supposed to bring him greater awareness of God’s mercy and justice, but he is diverted by comparison and competition which leave him basking in his own admiration but bereft of God’s mercy. His scrupulosity has brought him to the kind of “works theology” that the Apostle Paul warned would lead to a dead end, emphasis on dead. We cannot earn God’s love by means of our good works. Paul, the Pharisee, presents himself as the best example of the futility of seeking justification by anything other than faith alone, faith in the mercy and justice of God.

So, our Pharisee, in his self-righteousness has lost sight of the very grace and beatitude which have contributed to his well-being and our Publican in his unworthiness is graced with forgiveness and made right by God’s own hand, and therein is the cautionary lesson, not only for Jesus’ disciples, but for those of us who have taken on his name. We must take care to not walk away this morning with a cursory examination of our own lives in the light of the Gospel, and thinking, “Thank God, I’m not like that Pharisee,” because in all likelihood you are. We all are.

There is nothing more universally human than the desire to be special. To rise above the crowd and gain status and recognition for what we have done, for who we are, or think we are, to excel and be rewarded for our efforts. To compare ourselves with those around us, and ultimately feel some satisfaction that we are better, kinder, nobler than others. Or, on the other hand, not as pretty or handsome as, smart as, worthy as those who in our mind rank above us. This, however, is not a dynamic which exists in the mind of the just God who created everything and called it “Good.” That God sees into the heart, soul, mind of everyone, and responds with a love that bids participation in a just and grace-filled life.

Our on-going task as modern disciples is to strive for God’s perfect justice while always being aware of and owning the many ways we remain highly imperfect in our actual achievements to that end. It is by holding on to just such an attitude and awareness of our many failings that we find true humility and gratitude. Holding this very real and often uncomfortable tension which results, is a healthy foundation for living a holy and truly righteous life in Christ. And, wouldn’t that make life better for us and everyone and everything we touch?

“Lord, be Thou merciful to me, a sinner.”

Amen.