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Proper 25, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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Today we have another parable, another story in which Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom of God, God's vision for the world. This is paired with last week's parable about the widow who was persistent in seeking justice, and Luke tells us that these two parables are about prayer. In our parable for today, there are two characters: there is the Pharisee, who was part of a Jewish group of which Jesus was also a part – Jesus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees held the Torah, the Law of Moses, in such high esteem that they took an additional oral law to make sure they never broke it. And praying with the Pharisee at the Temple at Jerusalem, is a tax collector.

Now, tax collectors in that time, sometimes known as publicans, were part of the bureaucracy, chosen by the Roman Empire from the local population to carry out certain works of government. In this case, this tax collector, maybe perhaps better known as a tax farmer, was renting out territory occupied by the Roman Empire to then collect taxes to then pay back as the rent. As a rule these tax collectors, these tax farmers, who were Jewish people, would create arbitrary taxes. They were corrupt, and took more money than they needed for the rent. These contractors would employ other Jewish people to sit in the booth. Because of their daily dealings with Gentiles, because of their corrupt nature, and because of their affiliation with the Roman Empire, they were outcasts and were seen as ritually unclean, as breakers of the Divine Law.

So the Pharisee, as he prays, looks over at the tax collector, with contempt. But Jesus says, that although the Pharisee who meets the Divine Law and even exceeds the Divine Law, who tithes the tenth percent that set out in the Law of Moses back in the days when the land, when the giving of the first ten percent, the first fruits from the land, were given to God as an act of devotion and of remembrance that all things come from God. Yet although the Pharisee gives out of his income this ten percent, the contents of the Pharisee's prayer is one of comparison, it's one of self-assurance of his righteousness, and of contempt for his neighbor.

Meanwhile, the tax collector is beating his breast, an expression in these times of deep remorse, of deep mourning. The heart of the tax collector is broken. Psalm 51, the tradition of Psalms from King David, speaks of God's desire, God's healing of the broken heart. There's a tradition

alongside the Divine Law, of those, who although they sin, break their heart open before God and repent.

In the beginning of Luke's Gospel, Jesus comes across a tax collector named Levi, who is later known as Matthew, and he says, "Follow me." And Levi, or Matthew, immediately follows him. Levi takes Jesus home, and they have a banquet with many other tax collectors. And we're told that the Pharisees say to Jesus, "How can you possibly eat with these people?" Because in that time, those God-fearing people who followed the Torah would not even walk on the same road as a tax collector, and here Jesus ate with them. And Jesus replies, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call righteous, but sinners to repentance."

So we come again to this understanding of righteousness, what is righteousness?

Righteousness was related to the upholding of God's Law, of God's Justice. So the Pharisee in our parable, believes because he is upholding God's Law, God's Justice, that he is justified or approved by God. But Jesus teaches that it is the tax collector, the traitor, the sinner, who begs for God's mercy with a broken and repentant heart, and asks for his heart, his will, to be aligned with the heart, or will, of God.

So what might this be teaching us about prayer? A broken heart is one that is open to transformation, that is open to the grace of God. In our tradition, we believe Matthew, or Levi, the tax collector called by Jesus, became one of the core disciples and possibly even wrote the Gospel according to Matthew. Right after this chapter is the story of Zaccheus, that famous tax collector, who like Levi called Matthew, is called by Jesus and immediately follows him. Although he is the chief tax collector and wealthy, he declares, "Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anybody out of anything I will pay back four times the amount." So the question is then, how are we approaching God in prayer? Are we approaching for contentment, for complacency? Or are we coming with our broken hearts, knowing that God has good news for the poor, good news for the broken-hearted, good news for the captives.

I think there's another teaching here for us today. The Pharisee is focused on his own doings, what he's done, how he's proven above and beyond the worth that God has given him freely, believing that he's earned "extra good" by doing. But the tax collector asks not from a place of wanting to do, but from a place of wanting to be, to become. So in this moment when we're trying to figure out what

to do, how to respond, perhaps the first place to begin is to approach God with our broken hearts, and ask: who shall we *be*? Amen.