

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

October 23, 2016

Righteousness Revealed

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story is told that one night a man in a restaurant bumped into a really famous celebrity. "Oh, wow!" the man exclaimed, "what an honor to meet you! By the way, my name is Austin, and I'm having a business dinner with some colleagues over there at that corner table. It would really impress my friends if you could come over in a few minutes and say, 'Hey Austin,' like you know me!" The celebrity good-naturedly agreed and so some minutes later went over to the table and said, "Hey Austin! How are you?" Austin then looked up and said, "Not now, buddy. We're busy!"

We are such prideful people. We always want to look more powerful and impressive than we really are. Or at very least we want to take what we already have in life and use it as a pedestal to look down on as many people as we can (while also hoping, of course, that all of those people will return the favor and so look up to us). It is no accident that the images typically associated with pride have to do with height: the proud are said to look down their noses at others, are said to always be riding their high horse, are said to have a lofty opinion of themselves and a soaring ego.

It's maybe the first day in a long time that I am grateful to not be a very tall person.

In today's gospel reading, we have the opportunity to overhear two different prayers: one from a pharisee.. And one from a tax collector.

It's a tricky text. Luke's Jesus presents us with two possible models for human righteousness, one of them focused on the Pharisee and his own goodness that he has earned for himself - and the other a tax collector who knows nothing but God's mercy and human need. By the end of the text we know we don't want to be like the Pharisee.

And yet, if we were Jewish, the meaning of this parable would not seem so clear. Everyone knew that pharisees were very good, godly people. The Pharisee did his best to live up to all of the laws and everything that was expected of him. According to Pharisees, holiness was not something for just the priestly class within Israel, that all Israel was after all a nation of priests.

All the little details of life could be lived with care, and then not just priests but even farmers and construction workers could follow religious rules and thereby glorify God.

And really, our problem with the Pharisee isn't that he tried to live a holy life. The problem isn't his fasting and tithing and coming to the temple to pray. Part of the problem with him is that he thought he'd managed to make himself holy. But the other part is the prayer itself. Oh, it starts out well enough: "God, I thank you." But from there on it's all about him, and all about why he's so thankful that he isn't like everyone else, especially this tax collector. Yikes. If we're honest, we've prayed this prayer ourselves. Many, many times.

On the other hand, we have the tax collector. By the end of the text he's what we want to be like. But we need to remember that at that time, tax collectors in general were not a model for anyone: they got rich by hounding God's own people to get money to fund the occupation of God's promised land. But the humble prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" - well, that seems to be a great prayer, especially in comparison to the Pharisee! And so by the end of the text, we think to ourselves, yes... this is the meaning of this parable. Be like the tax collector. This parable is about being humble.

The problem with this whole thing is that it can be kind of a trap. Let me explain.

As a response to this text and the pharisee and the tax collector, we may offer a prayer, saying, "God I thank you that you did not make me self-righteous. I sin seven times before breakfast, I don't bother to recycle plastic, and I don't take care of my family like I should. See how rotten I am? I need you, God. Other people may need to be reminded how much they need you, but thank you for not making me like one of them."

Did you hear the trap? As soon as we start congratulating God for preserving us from being as arrogant as the Pharisee, we find that we have cast ourselves in the role of the Pharisee.

The thing is, God's kingdom doesn't work like this. If we choose the right one - pharisee or tax collector - we don't guarantee our own righteousness. When we look at the smugness of the Pharisee and look in the mirror, if we're being honest we'll know we often look a lot like the Pharisee. We can look at the neediness of the tax collector and look in the mirror, and if we're being honest we'll see ourselves there too. The problem is, neither one of those does us any good. This is not a text in which we can find people to model ourselves after. This may be hard to admit but: it's not all about us.

When we think that this story is simply about being humble when we come to God in prayer, we miss the point. This isn't a story about either of these two people. This is a story about God.

It's a story about who God is and how God acts toward us whether we're smug in our self-righteousness or despairing of our sin. Jesus told this parable as a lesson in grace. It's a word of good news for both the Pharisees among us who depend on our goodness to make us acceptable and for the sinners who can see only our failures and assume that we are condemned. Jesus' hearers would have found it scandalous that grace is given to such a scoundrel as the tax collector and that it was given so easily. All he did was ask! If the goodness of the Pharisee didn't make him justified—then what chance could I possibly have at being made righteous?

That's exactly Jesus' point. None of us can earn God's love. God doesn't love us more when we behave better. God doesn't love us more when we misbehave. In God's eyes the one thing that unites us is his love for us. For God there's just one classification of people in this world. We all belong to it. It's called: Children of God.

Biblical scholar Father Robert Capon in commenting on this parable writes: "Like all Jesus' parables it should carry a warning, "this will be hazardous to all your previous opinions about how religion works and how God works." He adds, "What this parable is about is not, as it seems to say at the end, the virtue of humility. The Pharisee's problem is not that he is showing off. It is that he really believes that his stack of good deeds is enough to save the world. And he believes it is enough if only everyone else would do what he does—that is enough to save the whole world. What God really says in Christ is that human goodness isn't good enough to do this trick."

Again and again, Jesus reminds us. Righteousness isn't an accomplishment. It's a gift. Forgiveness is offered to all who ask. God's love is unconditional. Mercy isn't a matter of our merits but God's nature. That's why grace is such a radical notion and such a "tricky thing".

Because here's the truth: God loves you for Jesus' sake, not because of what you are like but because of what God is like. Want to know what God is like? God is like the waiter who keeps coming back to fill the water glass every time you take a sip. God is like the nurse caring for you in the hospital who knows what you need even before you need it. God is like the patient listener who faithfully and kindly listens to you when you have a bad day and tells you to hang in there. God is like the faithful teacher who never, never gives up when you just can't seem to understand your multiplication facts. And - get this - God is like that guy who came to this world to die for you - even though you didn't deserve it - but did it because He loves YOU that much.

God's grace is always generous, coming to us when we clearly don't deserve it, clearly haven't earned it, coming to us in overflowing, multiplying ways. God's grace has got a hold of you - pulling you close - and it will never, ever, ever let go.

Thanks be to God. Amen.