

October 23, 2022
Lectionary 30, Year C
The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 18:9-14
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Team Pharisee or Team Tax Collector

There is an irony in today's gospel reading that cannot be ignored. And it might be worse than an irony. It might even be characterized as a trap.

Because it's not hard to listen to the parable, to listen to the prayers of the Pharisee, with his list of good deeds, with his list of all of the things that he's done to enable him to stand before God in his prayers, and be offended.

I feel like, as Lutheran Christians, we're even more likely, perhaps than some others, to end up being disdainful of the Pharisee's prayer. After all, aren't we the "saved by grace, and not by our works" people. Aren't we people who believe that our salvation is not earned or gained by our good works, our righteous deeds, but by God's deep love and grace poured out on us in Jesus Christ.

So, I feel like we, of all people, of all Christians, might be shocked by the Pharisee's list. And that's where the trap comes in.

Because our next step might be to think to ourselves, "God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee."

You see what happened there. The very prayer that we found offensive, the listing of virtues that we recoiled from, is the very kind of thing that we might be inclined to do when we hear this parable.

We might somewhere, in our deepest places, start ranking people, who is truly worthy of God's grace, God's mercy? Who is better in God's eyes? Our theological bias is to think that those who do not try to justify themselves in God's sight, who do not come to God with a list of their good deeds, touting their own worthiness of God's attention, of God's mercy, would in fact, be more worthy of

it. In fact, we could get to a place where we start thinking, of how well this parable fits our theology; our theology that tells us to come before God with empty hands, as humble sinners, who rely only on God's grace for God's mercy.

Our theology tells us that we don't want to be on Team Pharisee. So perhaps we this parable and our theology are telling us to be more like the tax collector. But do we really want to be like the tax collector?

One the things that offended the righteous people of Jesus' time most about him was that he spent time with tax collectors. Because Jesus spent so much time with tax collectors, we might be inclined to be pretty sympathetic with them. After all, if they were good enough for Jesus, they should be good enough for us. Plus, the tax collector in today's parable really knew how to pray. He prayed like a Lutheran! Or at least the way a Lutheran ought to pray. This is what the text tells us about the tax collectors' prayer:

But 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!' (Luke 18:13)

Now that's a prayer! That's a man who understands that his justification is not based on his own righteousness, but instead on God's grace and mercy. Let's go Team Tax Collector!

It probably won't surprise you to learn that there's a problem lying in wait for all of us tax collector enthusiasts out there.

The problem is that tax collectors really did terrible things in the Roman Empire.

The way that tax collecting worked for the Romans was that they would enlist members of the local population to bid for taxation contracts. If one wanted to collect taxes for the Romans one would promise the Romans a certain amount

of money from their tax district, whether it was a village, town, city, highway, market, temple, or dock and then they would overcharge their fellow citizens, so that they could pay the Romans what they had contracted to pay and grow wealthy at the same time. They were often dishonest and greedy people who fleeced their neighbors. They were collaborators with the Roman oppressors. They upheld unjust systems, turning a blind eye to the crucifixions at the crossroads, and lived a fine life off of the labor of others.

So, maybe we don't want to be so much like the tax collector. Because he got prayers right, but he got a lot of other things wrong.

After all, there's nothing in the text to suggest that anything about the tax collector's outward life changed after his prayer in the Temple.

The text says that he went home justified. In our theology, being justified, means, having been made just, having been reconciled to God, and put in a right relationship with God, but honestly, that's a little offensive if he just stayed the same. And there's no evidence that he changed. There's no evidence that his exploitative treatment of his neighbors stopped.

Maybe the Pharisee had something was right in not wanting to be like "that tax collector". Do we really want to be like the tax collector?

This parable is deceptively simple, until you think about it. That's actually true about most of the parables.

Because we know we don't want to be like the Pharisee, with his self-righteous prayer, putting himself before others in God's sight.

I thank God that I'm not like that Pharisee...

But I really question whether any of us really want to be like the tax collector, hated and for good reason, because, for the most part, tax collectors were terrible people. I think most of us want to believe that we are good, honest, and honorable people. Like the Pharisee, upright, honest, faithful to God in our actions, seeking

God's holiness in our lives. But then, do we start thinking that our relationship with God is based on our goodness rather than on God's grace and mercy?

I thank God that I'm not like that tax collector....

Honestly, it's tough to know which way to turn. Honestly, it's tough even to be honest. Because as much as we might hear Jesus words at the end of the parable, summing it up so nicely for us

“for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14)

Still, it's hard not to pick sides, to decide which camp we want to be in, to choose a team. Team Pharisee, good life, terrible prayers or Team Tax Collector, terrible life, good prayers.

There really are no good choices here.

But maybe that's okay. Because maybe this parable isn't about us making a choice. Maybe it's not about picking a side, choosing a team. Maybe it's not about seeing life in a binary kind of way. Maybe it's recognizing that the Pharisee and the Tax Collector live in all of us, have a home in all of us. Maybe it's about us recognizing that neither our humble prayers, sincere or not, nor our righteous and good deeds make us worthy of God's grace.

Maybe it's about realizing that sometimes even when we confess our sins and cry out for God's mercy, we don't really plan to change. Maybe it's about the fact that when we make our lists of ways in which we've lived up to what we believe God wants it's something we want to hide behind so that no one sees what's really in our hearts or on our minds. Maybe it's about the fact that it's way easier to compare ourselves to others than it is to try to justify ourselves.

So, we all need to be humbled. And we all need to be exalted. And that's what God does. For all of us. Surprises us by grace in whatever way we need it. This parable is not about us choosing a side or making a choice. It's about celebrating the choice that God makes everyday to make a place for all of us, Tax Collectors

and Pharisees, all of us together, whether we're surprised to find ourselves there or surprised by those who are there with us.

That Tax Collector.

That Pharisee.

You.

Me.

Humbled.

Exalted.

Justified.

Embraced by God's choice.

For we are chosen. Chosen for Team Grace, chosen for Team Love, chosen for Team Mercy, chosen for Team Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.