

**The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to October 26**

Proper 25

Year C

RCL

First Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Call to worship: Sirach 35:12-17

Second Reading: Luke 18:9-14

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Sirach 35:12-17

Give to the Most High as he has given to you,
and as generously as you can afford.

For the Lord is the one who repays,
and he will repay you sevenfold.

Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it
and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice;
for the Lord is the judge,
and with him there is no partiality.

He will not show partiality to the poor;
but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.

He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,
or the widow when she pours out her complaint.

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 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!’ 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.”

SERMON

Pharisees get a bad rep in the New Testament. Every time the word is mentioned, we're all set to stick a black hat on the poor guy's head. That is not how a Pharisee would have been seen by the original readers of Luke's account, though. A Pharisee in Luke's time was one who dedicated his entire life to a scrupulous pursuit of the Law of God. I saw a documentary once about a Jewish winery. They were producing kosher wine. The presenter was standing by a pipe and said that he had to be careful not to touch the pipe, through which the grape juice was running, because, had he done so, the winery would have to be stopped, the juice discarded, and the pipe disassembled and purified. When he finished speaking, they kept the camera on as a worker carefully lead him away from the pipe.

That's how you should think about Pharisees — people who took the Law very, very seriously, and who were trying to live scrupulously within its confines. So, for Luke's readers, the Pharisee would be seen as the guy that was trying very, very hard to do exactly what God told his Chosen People to do.

The tax collector, on the other hand, would have been seen by the people to whom Jesus was speaking as a state-sponsored sneak

thief. He collected taxes for the Romans, which was bad enough, but the system permitted him to keep anything he collected above an amount the Romans demanded of him. That means that he fed and clothed his family by taking too much tax from those from whom he collected, paying the correct amount to the Romans, and pocketing the rest.

So, as often happens in the stories Jesus told, Jesus starts with the good guy, the Pharisee, and the bad guy, the tax collector, and then reverses their roles. But why, precisely, is the prayer of the Pharisee wrong, and why, precisely, is the prayer of the tax collector right? Will not the Pharisee leave and continue in his efforts to abide by the law of God, and will not the tax collector leave and continue to live from the collection of taxes? What is God up to here? The answer depends on the word “justified”. The story is about our relationship to God.

Luke puts this story into context for us. “Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Now...do we know anybody like that? Do we ever run into any “Holier-than-thou” folks?

Well....yes. I’m afraid we’re all guilty, though we don’t like to

admit it.

Kathy and I have spent our life together dealing, sometimes quite closely, with folks you might not like. Some of them were addicted. Some of them were “criminals”. When I look back on it, there were an awful lot of people we, culturally, like to be contemptuous about, and you know what? I liked a lot of them. I used to get in political trouble by saying that I came across very few people that I saw as truly evil, but an awful lot of people who seemed to me to be cases of arrested development — children in adult guise with no more idea how to run a life than I have of how to fly a jet plane.

That’s unsatisfying to us as people. Something there is within us — a nagging need, perhaps given form and voice through many Saturday afternoons at the Paramount theater — to see God’s children through the lens of cops and robbers — good guys and bad guys. Something there is within us that seeks to measure our own righteousness against not just the sins of others, which would be bad enough, but against our perceptions of the sins of other. Something there is within us that believes that for our own righteousness to shine, we must paint those around us in the darkest of colors. Jesus is telling us that we cannot shine by extinguishing the candles of

others. This is not a happy thought for any of us.

You see, church, God's mercy is freely given to all who ask, but to ask God for His mercy, you first have to know that you are in need of it. Preaching about sin fell out of vogue forty years ago. It's not a pleasant topic. Who wants to hear about that? It's much more in fashion to preach about God's great love than God's great mercy but here we are — stuck in a Gospel corner. Jesus is speaking about justification, mercy and confession, and there's just no way to turn from that and preach about how lovely are the flowers in God's garden. We have to face it. You can't experience God's forgiveness unless you first confess that you are in need of it. "I'm good, God, but forgive me for whatever I might have done that wasn't perfect" won't do it, church.

We see that sort of thing all the time, really. Somebody in public life, usually politics, forgets that all microphones are on and says something stupid. When it gets splashed all over, the politician says, "If anyone was offended, I am sorry."

Get that — not "I offended..." but "**If** anyone was offended..." That won't do.

So the Pharisee doesn't confess his sins — instead, he compares

himself to the tax collector and gives thanks to God that he's not as bad as the tax collector. It's exactly the situation of the old joke about two guys running from a bear. One says, "We're never going to outrun the bear." The other says, "I don't have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you." It's not a question of being the best of a bad lot. It is a question of living into God's mercy, by knowing that we need it and turning to God to confess our need. We cannot experience God's forgiveness by trying to bamboozle God. God is not bamboozable. He knows your sins. And He knows that it won't get any better until you confess it. What we're looking for here is a personal acknowledgement that we know them, too.

I hang around with a lot of non-Christian people, and what I hear from a lot of them is that Christianity's insistence that we are all sinners is intended to make people feel bad so that they will give more money to the church to make themselves feel better.

Well...I better not catch any of you giving money to the church so that you'll feel righteous about yourself. I don't want you to feel righteous about anything you do. I want you to feel loved by God, and that should be quite enough for anybody. THEN you can give money to the church.

It is ultimately a question of how we measure ourselves. Do we measure ourselves against God's righteousness, or against what we perceive to be the shortcomings of our brothers and sisters? If we're being holier-than-thou about the things we think our brothers and sisters have failed at, we are not focused on God's mercy. If we focus on God's grace and love for each of us, even though we disappoint Him constantly, it should knock the wind, and a lot of the silliness, out of us. From that realization, we can confess "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" That confession, church, is the beginnings of a new walk with God.

We talked last week — well, I talked. You listened — about my perception that our need to punish is greater than our willingness to restore. I see that as a great sin underlying a lot of the things we mess up. If the goal of justice is to punish and exclude the unrighteous, rather than to restore the community, then so long as I can perceive myself to be righteous by comparing myself to my brothers and sisters, I can convince myself that I am safe from punishment. And I get the double blessing of being able to convince myself that my brothers and sisters had it coming for whatever I have convinced myself they have done.

If I admit that I am a sinner as well, then I ally myself with my brothers and sisters, and can petition God for restoration. What a difference!

The Pharisee in Jesus' story did no wrong in focusing his attention on God's Law. The Covenant was given to the Jews, and he was doing his best to follow faithfully the demands of that Covenant. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that he had decided to appropriate God's role and become his own judge of himself. To nobody's surprise, he found himself innocent of wrong-doing. This is where we get ourselves into the most trouble with our own holier-than-thou attitudes.

We are not honest judges of ourselves, and we are not honest judges of our brothers and sisters. We're conflicted. We're dishonest with ourselves and with each other. We want to see everybody in terms of roles we have assigned to them — good guy, bad guy, cop, robber, butcher, baker, candlestick maker. It doesn't matter which roles we assign to whom. We're wrong when we do it because we are dishonest judges. And the only response we can make when we realize what we are doing is, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Jesus ended this example story with the comment:

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.

This is the real heart of the matter. The Pharisee thought he could pursue justification in the eyes of God by outrunning the tax collector. The tax collector recognized that justification between us and God comes from God, not from our own evaluation of our personal righteousness.

This is what makes Christianity so radical in the history of the world. We understand that God pursues us. It's not a question of doing the right things or being "good enough", and certainly not a matter of being a better person than our neighbor, be he tax collector or cleric. It is a matter of turning and allowing God to catch us, or, rather, to turn and realize that we are His to begin with.

It is our relationship with God which should inform our relationship with our brothers and sisters. We cannot count our lives as righteous by outrunning our brothers and sisters. We must outrun the bear of our own failures to live into the relationship with God which is offered to us. That relationship begins with an honest humbling of our prideful selves. We have to admit that God is God and we are not. God exalts and God judges. That's not an easy thing to accept,

for some of us.

AMEN