

Mother Lynn Finnegan  
 Church of the Holy Faith  
 Twentieth Sunday Pentecost  
 Proper 25  
 Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22;  
 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

### The Parable of the Merciful God

I love Jesus. I love Jesus for a lot of reasons, but I especially love him today for the absolute brilliance of the parable we just heard. At face value, the parable leads us to criticize the Pharisee's sense of moral superiority. Pharisees and tax collectors are well-known characters in Luke's gospel, and this parable seems like just one more instance of Jesus throwing shade, giving us an opportunity to nod our heads in agreement. What a self-righteous insert-your-favorite-name calling-noun here that Pharisee is! And from that thought, it's an easy leap, isn't it, to do some imaginary finger pointing and say to oneself, "I sure do know a few people today who are just like that Pharisee." And maybe you do. Certainly our political and social lives have been invaded by ever-increasing contemptuous and degrading vitriol. Or perhaps you hear this parable, and you find yourself aligning with the tax collector who humbled himself before God. We are, after all, good, faithful church-attending folks. It's even possible to think of ourselves as better than the tax collector because we are both good people AND humble. Herein, however, lies Jesus' brilliance. Because as soon as we think the parable affords a chance to vilify the Pharisee and identify with the tax collector, as soon as we interpret it as a self-congratulatory opportunity to condemn the other and elevate ourselves, we are committing the same offense the parable is teaching against. We then become the ones caught in the trap of self-righteousness, contempt, and false humility.

In this parable, Jesus invites us to let go of our human-constructed divisions of who's a Pharisee and who's a tax collector; to let go of fixating on who's in and who's out, who's right and who's

wrong, who's good and who's not, and stand before God, aware only of our own need and complete dependency on his love and mercy. The "Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector" might be better named the "Parable of the Merciful God." Jesus' parable directs us away from contemptuous judgment of the other, and directs us toward a right relationship with God.

What does that right relationship look like? Well, it looks like both the Pharisee AND the tax collector. Two seemingly opposite characters stand before God; both are in need of God's love and forgiveness. And they both ARE loved and forgiven by God. The Pharisees, for all their hypocrisy, were devotees of Torah. They played an essential role in ensuring the theological and spiritual continuity of Judaism. The Pharisee in the parable names a number of things we should all value: He prays. He fasts, far more often than the Torah required. His generosity also exceeds what the Torah requires. He doesn't steal, or cause harmful disruption, or commit adultery. These are all behaviors Jesus would celebrate. He sounds like someone we would gladly welcome in our congregation. The Pharisee, however, is basically giving God a progress report. "Dear God, I'm nothing like that guy over there and I'm doing quite well, thank you." His words are more speech than prayer and remind me of my two-year-old granddaughter, whose favorite sayings are "I do it" and "I got it." The Pharisee is the epitome of, as Luke says in the introduction of the parable, some "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." It isn't that he is speaking falsely, but he misses the true nature of grace and blessing. He asks nothing of God and goes home with nothing.

The tax collector, though, recognizes that prayer is not a report card. Instead of making a claim to righteousness based on accomplishments, he relies entirely on God's mercy. He, to the disgust of his fellow Jews, is a puppet of the Roman oppressors. While we are not told he pocketed money for himself, he presumably has done something for which he is deeply ashamed. Unlike

the story of Zaccheus, we also aren't given any information to indicate he will amend his ways. So why does Jesus say he is justified? Mercy. God's abundant mercy. There is a short, repetitive one-sentence prayer that originated with the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the sixth century. It is believed to be based on the words of the tax collector in this parable and the words of the ten lepers who cried out to Jesus in the gospel passage we heard a few weeks ago. Called the Jesus Prayer, it is simply, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." While both men in the parable are loved and forgiven by God, the tax collector, in his humility, is *open to* the gift of love and forgiveness, and the Pharisee is not. The tax collector leaves the Temple justified, neither a prisoner of self-sufficiency nor self-abasement.

Jesus is not saying we refrain from crying out against injustice and contempt. In the well-known words of the prophet Micah, God specifically requires of us to "do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God." It is dangerous, though, to compare our relative goodness. Moral manipulation drives a wedge between us and our neighbor and between us and God. Last week's parable of the Persistent Widow taught the value of continuing to show up in our prayer life, no matter how we feel or what our life circumstances are. Today's parable confirms why we keep showing up: we trust that God's mercy is abundant and everlasting. Our prayer life reflects our relationship with God. It reveals whether we are willing to be vulnerable enough to review our own self-sufficiency and our own sense of superiority. And it reveals whether we are willing to be vulnerable enough to then accept God's mercy and forgiveness and trust, with humility, that he is the one who will do the exalting. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Thank you, Jesus, for your brilliant Parable of the Merciful God.

In a moment, we will say together a confession of sin, being invited to "draw near with faith and make your humble confession" to God. Before we pray aloud, as we do each week, we will

incorporate a moment of silence for reflection. What will your prayer be during that pause?

Amen.