

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 23, 2022 (Proper 25, Year C)
Luke 18:9-14

“God, I thank you that I am NOT like OTHER people.” It seems RIDICULOUSLY CONCEITED, doesn't it? We would NEVER pray something like that.

But if we're honest, most of us HAVE said something like THIS: "Thank GOD I have faith, and that I go to CHURCH. Thank God I have HONEST WORK to do, and HEALTH in my body to do it. Thank God I'm not ADDICTED to drugs or booze. And thank God my children and I have a roof over our heads. I KNOW that God loves ME. I give my offerings here at church and volunteer my time in various programs, too. Thank God I'm NOT LIKE THOSE people who are lost, lonely, dishonest, and WITHOUT the hope I have in my heart. I'm so GLAD I'm a CHRISTIAN."

When you think about it, that's not so DIFFERENT from what the Pharisee said.

The famous actor Gregory Peck was once standing in line with a friend, waiting for a table in a crowded Los Angeles restaurant. They'd been waiting for some time, and they weren't even that close to the front of the line. Peck's friend became impatient, and he said to him, "Why don't you tell the maitre d' who you are?" Gregory Peck responded with great wisdom. "No," he said, "if you have to TELL them who you are, then you AREN'T."

That's a lesson that the Pharisee in our gospel reading apparently had never learned. His prayer, if it can be CALLED that, is largely an ADVERTISEMENT for HIMSELF. He's SELLING himself to GOD. If only he'd had a Gregory Peck type there to remind him that if he had to TELL God who he was, then he WASN'T. God sees right through us.

The tax collector, on the other hand, didn't NEED to tell God who he was. He understood that GOD KNEW who he was. His prayer isn't an exercise in self-promotion, but a CONFESSION and a plea for MERCY. He isn't SELLING himself, but OPENING himself. And Jesus says, "It is THIS man who went home justified."

To be justified means to be DECLARED right, proclaimed "not guilty." The tax collector is declared to be in the RIGHT RELATIONSHIP to God, while the Pharisee, who is so CERTAIN of his OWN righteousness, is shown to be in the WRONG relationship with God. He is NOT justified.

Here's the THING though: This DOESN'T mean that the PHARISEE was a BAD PERSON, and that the TAX COLLECTOR was a GOOD person.

The parable suggests quite the OPPOSITE actually. The Pharisee makes some SPECIFIC STATEMENTS about his PIETY, and JESUS DOESN'T DISAGREE with him. Everything the man SAYS about himself is TRUE.

When he says, "I am not like other people," indeed he WASN'T like other people. He had a standard of morality that was far ABOVE the standard of that day.

When he said, "I fast twice a week;" it was LITERALLY TRUE. The Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday of every week.

When he says, "I give tithes of all I possess," he means he tithes on the gross and not on the net. He went BEYOND the Law of Moses. ALL the Pharisees did THAT.

When he says, "I am honest, I am faithful, I am zealous for my religion," he MEANS it, and every WORD of it is true. He truly IS a good man.

So when he basically says, "Lord, you are LUCKY to HAVE a guy like me, because I'm one of the BEST GUYS I KNOW," most of us would actually AGREE with him. He LOOKS like a REALLY GOOD PERSON ... on the OUTSIDE. Everything he SAYS about himself is absolutely TRUE.

And everything the TAX COLLECTOR said about HIMSELF was TRUE ALSO. He said, "Have mercy on me, O God. I'm a sinner." Absolutely. People of that time DESPISED tax collectors, because they made their living off the MISERY of others. Kind of like today, but A LOT worse. They collected money for the occupying Roman force, but they weren't PAID – it was expected that'd

they'd charge EXTRA for their OWN livelihood, and of course, they often became RICH along the way. Tax collectors were considered TRAITORS to their own PEOPLE, and their own GOD. He looks REALLY BAD on the outside. He's a sinner. Everything he SAYS about himself is absolutely TRUE.

So here we have a truly righteous dude, and a truly bad dude, but only ONE went home justified before God. And as ALWAYS with Jesus, it's NOT the one we expect.

The Pharisee had a PROBLEM. He had an "I" problem. The letter "I", not the organ, although the ONLY thing he can SEE is his REFLECTION. We read that little pronoun "I" FIVE times in just these two verses. He was STONED on the drug of SELF. He was a LEGEND in his own mind. He had an INFLATED view of who HE WAS, and a DEFLATED view of who GOD was.

A story. A martial arts student was meeting with his master at a table, having tea. The student said to his master, "I've learned all you have to teach me about defending myself. I want to learn ONE thing MORE now. Please teach me about the ways of God."

The master took the tea-kettle and starting pouring the student's cup. Soon the cup was full and began to spill over onto the saucer. But the master CONTINUED to pour the tea until it spilled over the SAUCER, and then onto the TABLE, and onto the FLOOR.

The student finally said, "Stop, stop, the tea is spilling over. The cup can't take any more."

The master then looked at the student and said, "Learn from the cup. You are so full of YOURSELF, that there is no ROOM in your life for GOD. It is not possible for you to learn the WAYS of God until you learn to EMPTY YOURSELF."

The Pharisee's PRIDE had made him too BIG for his spiritual britches. C. S. Lewis once said, "A proud man is always looking DOWN on things and people; and of course, as long as you are looking DOWN, you can't SEE something that's ABOVE you."

This is the nature of grace: It can only be RECEIVED by those who would grant it to others. Only the MERCIFUL can RECEIVE mercy, and only those who FORGIVE will BE forgiven.

The Pharisee had ENOUGH RELIGION to be VIRTUOUS, to be PIOUS, to be DEVOUT, to LIVE a GOOD LIFE, but NOT enough religion to be HUMBLE, or MERCIFUL. His religion drove him to look DOWN on the tax collector, rather than LIFT him UP.

So go ahead and BE a RIGHTEOUS DUDE, but don't forget to get your HEART in the right place too, because if your eyes are looking DOWN at somebody, you can't look UP to God. Amen.