

August 23, 2020

"Yesterday a Sinner, Today a Saint"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 18:9-14

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

There are many different facets to this parable, but to really get at its meaning, I want to take you back to an Old Testament verse that has become one of my favorites. It's from the prophet Micah who tells us, "This is what the Lord requires of you, mortal... to love kindness, to do justice, and to walk humbly with your God." To love kindness, to do justice, and to walk humbly with your God. This one simple precept comprises everything we need to do to live our lives the way God wants. Because think about it. To love kindness means we have a genuine desire to show others understanding and compassion and love. To do justice means we work to make sure everyone is treated equitably, fairly, justly. And to walk humbly with God is to remember your place before God, to know just who and Whose you are... that there is one God, one Creator, and you are not him! So, with this simple precept in mind, let's go to the parable.

From all outward appearances, this story is about a good man who prays a very bad prayer. And it's about a bad man, who prays a very good prayer. A Pharisee and a tax man. Both men went to the temple to pray. Yet here are two individuals, who cannot be more widely apart from each other in all matters of life and circumstance. Let me tell you about them. The Pharisee was a religious man, who I'm sure knew the exact chapter and verse of that lesson from Micah I just read. He would probably be considered by everyone as a good person and a good citizen. By his own admission he didn't steal, he didn't cheat, he was faithful to his wife, and he gave generously to the temple. Even Jesus, in the parable, doesn't condemn him or call him a liar. But here's the problem. When we pray to God, we are either to look up in thanksgiving, in joy, in hope, in faith, praising God for His goodness, grace and blessings, or... or we are to look down in humility, acknowledging our sins, expressing our needs, seeking God's will, and knowing our place before God. And the Pharisee's fatal flaw is that he did neither of these. Instead, he was prideful, proclaiming his own goodness, while at the same time criticizing the tax collector. And in truth, how can a person ever be right with God while judging another?

The tax man, on the other hand, was a bad man. He himself confesses to this fact. There's no need to go into all the gory details, because he describes himself as, "me...a sinner." Back then, tax collectors worked for the hated Roman government. They were notorious for cheating, extorting money,

squeezing the lifeblood out of honest, hard working families who were already terribly impoverished. The tax collector was despised because of how his actions so adversely affected the lives of those he taxed. But here, this particular tax man is clearly moved by a deep sense of humility and repentance. He has come to the temple with a heavy burden weighing on his soul, and he wishes to be rid of the burden he carries by begging God for mercy. Listen again to what he says, “God, have mercy on me...a sinner.” So the bottom line of the parable: the tax collector's prayer was good because he came in all humility before God. The Pharisee's prayer was bad because he was prideful. And Jesus said it was the tax man, not the Pharisee, who went home made right with God.

So since pride is an issue here, let me address it for a moment. We talk about national pride, pride in our children and grandchildren, there's black pride, gay pride...you get the point. And there are certainly positive aspects of pride – a sense of achievement, a desire for excellence, the goal to do the very best we can do. But then, there's self-pride. Which has a different definition. And this is where we so often get confused. This is where those other two parts of Micah's teaching, about loving kindness and doing justice, get lost in translation. Because self-pride so easily turns into egotism, arrogance and personal agendas. When we become like the Pharisee, and say, “Thank you, God. Thank you that I'm not like other people – the racist, the thug, the drunk, the abuser, the homeless bum, the person cheating the system. Just look at me – I obey the rules, I go to church, I volunteer, I give my money. I'm a good person.” You see, when we compare ourselves to others, we can quickly become judgmental, critical, intolerant. When we pride ourselves on our own worthiness, we elevate ourselves to a pedestal above others. And Jesus' mandate “to love thy neighbor as thyself,” somehow turns into a justification to...“love only thyself.”¹

We need to remember – we never really know what another person is going through, or what's in another person's heart and soul. I've told this story before, but it captures the point. Many years ago John and I had a different life – we were in the restaurant business. We knew and worked with many, many, wonderful, hard-working people. But the culture of the restaurant business – the stress, the late nights, the after work parties and more, create an atmosphere where it's so easy to make bad choices. So very easy to make mistakes. Casual affairs, smoking, heavy drinking, and drugs especially, can become a way of life. Well, in my last church, at a beach service one Sunday morning, a former restaurant colleague showed up. Now at one time he and his brother ran one of the best restaurants in

¹ *Sinning Like A Christian*: Will Willimon

Dennis. But when I saw him, at first I didn't even recognize him. Although he was young in years, he was aged and sickly in appearance. If you looked closely at his face, you could actually see the tombstones in his eyes. And I'm sure people looked at him and the wretched condition he was in, and thought to themselves, "I'm glad I'm not like that man." But he showed up at the beach services every Sunday for a month. And when it finally dawned on me who he was, I went over and spent some time with him and prayed with him. He told me he was trying to turn his life around, but was afraid it was too late. And then, a week later, he died. And to this day I can't help thinking that no matter what mistakes this man may have made in his life, what sins he may have committed, he found salvation on that beach, where creation and humanity so often come together and we finally realize just who and Whose we really are. After wasting the gift of life God had given him with drugs and alcohol and hard living, he finally came back to God in all humility. And just like the prodigal son who was lost, he was welcomed home by a loving God that forgives all our transgressions. Just like that last worker who comes into the vineyard in the final hour, he too, received a full day's wage from our generous God. Just like the dishonest manager who finally makes an accounting, he becomes a changed person in the presence of our God of mercy and compassion. And just like today's tax man, he also goes home, made right with God. It reminds me of a beautiful quote from St. Francis de Sales that goes like this, "The day that is past must not judge the present day, nor the present day judge that which is past: it is only the Last Day that judges all." What comfort this is – that there is yet hope for all of us on that last day when we come face to face with the Lord.

We heard Jesus say today, "Those who humble themselves will be exalted." Someone once wrote, "No man can enter the kingdom of heaven with his head erect. The gate of heaven is low, and he who would enter through it must first stoop down. But on the other side of the gate he shall find such unspeakable glories that he shall be raised up." And that's really what this parable is all about. Humility. Humility that causes us to know our place before God. Humility that says we need to compare ourselves, not to others, but to Jesus Christ. Because if we want to look at the perfect example of humility, we need only to look at him. As St. Paul said, Jesus humbled himself to come to us. He came as the lowest and the least among us. He was the little one born in a stable to peasants, the impoverished one with no place to lay his head or call home, the one who would stoop down to wash another's feet, the one who hung in agony on the cross for our sins, the one who died so that we may be, indeed, raised up.

Yes, it is easy to become confused trying to measure ourselves by our good works, our charity, our generosity. But this parable stands as a reminder that we all have our human limitations, we all have our weaknesses, we all have our faults, no matter how good we think we are. So let us abandon the hope of gaining the favor or approval of God on the basis of our own prideful righteousness or by proclaiming our own goodness, but instead come to God with an attitude of humility, relying solely on God's goodness, grace and mercy.

So today, may we leave here as good people, saying good prayers, committed to following that precept: To love kindness, to do justice, and to walk humbly with God. To love kindness, to do justice, and to walk humbly with God. Amen.

Prayer

O Lord, we come humbly before you now, knowing our place before you. Asking that you forgive us those times when we are prideful, when we think better of ourselves than we ought to. And, forgive us when we think less of others than we ought to. In these times we are living in, Lord, it seems especially easy to point our finger, to criticize the other, to put ourselves in a good light. But we know that there is both saint and sinner in each one of us. And so help us to stay humble, and to work on our own weaknesses and faults. And may we especially seek to love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly, forever, with you. Amen.