

both/and
Luke 18: 9-14
November 3, 2019
Consecration Sunday

Pharisees and tax collectors are almost stock characters in the Bible. You've got the self-righteous, overly pious, rule-spouting religious leader; and the humble, repentant, rejected outcast.

It would be so easy to sum up this passage like this: Pharisee bad, tax collector good. Works bad, faith good.

And there is good reason for this straightforward interpretation, as Luke does seem to frame the parable in just these terms. He starts off the passage saying that Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." The difficulty, though, with such an interpretation, is that we might as well end up saying "Lord, we thank you that we are not like *those* people: the hypocrites, the overly pious, self righteous ones. We are glad we are not like *that* Pharisee." That sounds a little like contempt to me.

Have you ever judged someone? Have you ever looked at someone and thought "thank you God that I am not like that person?" I know I have.

Whether it's someone self-righteous, overly confident, living life in a way that doesn't meet my standards, failing an exam, voting for this person or that person... Judgment is all too easy. It seems that most people, myself included, too easily find ourselves harshly judging those we disagree with and I imagine it has been like that throughout the ages.

It's our greatest human temptation to try and divide people into groups, "us" and "them;" "right" and "wrong," but, as this parable asserts, any time we try to draw a line between "us" and "them," we often find God on the side that we don't expect.

The central question being explored in this parable is "what does it mean to act faithfully? What does a faithful life look like?" And I believe that we have two good answers here.

First, I am reminded of that infamous passage from James: Faith, without works, is dead. This passage has been debated by theologians over the centuries, and as Presbyterians we believe that there are no works we can do to earn our salvation, that God's grace and mercy have been already offered to us in spite of the things that we do. Our justification is not obtained by doing things, even good things like fasting and giving, in fact, it cannot be achieved at all, at least not by us. Our justification comes through God's reaching out in mercy to helpless sinners, just like us.

And yet, it is right of God to expect something of us. To care for each other, to care for the earth, to care for ourselves and to represent God in the world.

It was not the Pharisee's actions that caused him to be humbled, it was the way in which he viewed himself and his actions: as better than anyone else, especially that tax collector over there.

Though the Pharisee comes off as self-righteous, fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of your income is not a small thing. It may help to note that, in fact, everything the Pharisee says is true. He has set himself apart from others by his faithful adherence to the law. He is, by the standards both Luke and Jesus seem to employ earlier in the gospel, righteous. He takes his spiritual disciplines (fasting and tithing) seriously, and does them with care.

Today we will participate in our own spiritual discipline: consecrating our lives to God.

Our Presbyterian Church Book of Order says that "Giving has always been a mark of Christian commitment and discipleship. The ways in which a believer uses God's gifts of material goods, personal abilities, and time should reflect a faithful response to God's self-giving in Jesus Christ and Christ's call to minister to and share with others in the world."

And as we give of our lives and ourselves, this parable shows us the posture with which we are to do that, the attitude we must have. Not an attitude of self-righteousness, for giving is not a thing to check off the to-do list on the path to glory, but something that comes from from our faith and trust in God.

Because we have *that* example too in this parable: one of deep faith and trust in God, and particularly in God's mercy. Why would this tax collector come before God with such an honest and raw confession if he did not believe in God's ultimate goodness? Here this man comes before his gathered community, beats his breast and cries out to God, "Have mercy on me!"

A plea for mercy, such as the tax collector's, must also be followed by right behavior. And that right behavior must be sincere. For if we give of our hearts, so we must also give of our lives. To me, that can sometimes be harder. Missing a sporting event for Sunday worship, getting up early on a Saturday morning to go out and serve the community instead of sleeping in, an evening away from family spent attending a session or deacons meeting to serve the church community... those things command our attention as much as prayer and confession.

It's not about being *either* the Pharisee *or* the tax collector, not about "do this, not that." This parable shows us a way of life that is both/and. It's not enough to say we believe,

we have to do what we believe. It's not enough just go through the motions, we have to truly believe it deep in our hearts. And in our actions we must always acknowledge God, first and foremost.

So in worship, we confess our sins like the tax collector, but we also go out from this place and try to do the right thing. And honestly, it seems a lot like what the Pharisee does: spiritual disciplines, prayer, giving of his life. But, like the tax collector, we recognize that we do those things not to earn salvation from a God who keeps a list of "naughty and nice," but because we believe in God whose grace is not dependent on what we do, but on **who God is**.

We do what we can, we give what we can, we offer what we can. And we do it not out of guilt or to say that we've done it, but because we trust in and offer thanks and praise to God, God whose loving mercy stretches from the Pharisee to the tax collector and across all of us.