

Proper 25 – 22 Pentecost – Year C – October 24, 2010
Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:4-6, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14
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You all know the cartoon characters from Peanuts, created by Charles Schulz. In one of the strips, we find volatile Lucy in various positions staring at a patch of grass. She says, “Look at that bug, will you? He thinks he’s better than that other bug.” Then she shouts, “**What makes you think you’re so great?!**” Before walking away triumphantly, as she says, “I enjoy putting his kind in their place!” One might imagine that the attitude of the Pharisee in today’s Gospel lesson matches up quite well with Lucy’s tirade. “God I thank you that I am not like other people....”

Jesus uses two distinctive caricatures that his original audience would have no problem identifying with. The first is a devout adherent to the Law. It would be entirely normal and expected for the Pharisee to be in the Temple praying. He’s an individual that lives his faith, even to the point of fasting twice a week, and tithing a tenth of all his income. It’s important for us to see and hear this man’s faithfulness. He is willing to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God that really is a sacrifice: one that means discomfort physically and financially. Fasting is by no means easy; it requires a deep spirituality to voluntarily fast even occasionally in honor of the Lord, let alone twice a week. Tithing, that is giving ten percent of our income, likewise is still a challenge for many. The actions of the faithful Pharisee would not be a surprise to the audience, and are still models of faithfulness for each and every one of us today. The second caricature is that of the tax collector. A man who was undoubtedly hated and vilified by his own people for being the equivalent of an enemy collaborator. He is the epitome of injustice in his daily work, extorting hard-earned money to make a profitable living, as well as to support the unjust systemic evil of the Roman Empire. Yet here he is at the Temple praying for God’s mercy. The very last place any of us would expect to see such an unethical crook. Does his humble prayer for mercy mean that he has seen the error of his ways? Or do we take the cynical approach and assume that he is simply looking for cheap grace? Actually, in the Jewish tradition it would be a given that before he came to pray for God’s mercy, the tax collector would have repented of his sins.

What is absolutely scandalous to Jesus’ audience is that the despised tax collector, having just seen the error of his ways, and perhaps coming before God for the first time in prayer goes home justified by God’s grace and mercy. Whereas the faithful and loyal, incredibly devout and regular worshipper of God is not seen to be righteous in God’s eyes. He could be you or me, or any one of millions of Christians who have surrendered to God in Christ Jesus, and offer ourselves to His service daily. What an absolute rip off. Is God stupid or what? Is this some kind of cheap grace pyramid scheme, where a bunch of degenerate n’er-do-wells can jump in at the end, and reap all the rewards? Is it fine and dandy to live outrageously sinful lives and then turn to God for a last minute reprieve? Does it sound like one of those deathbed baptisms that were once so popular: live your life anyway you want, fill it with dissolute living, and then just before you die, you can be baptized, washed of your sins, forgiven and welcomed into the loving arms of God. It’s all messed up, like the story of a bunch of computer geeks who pulled a Halloween prank on a New Jersey supermarket. They hacked in to the bar code system, and stirred up some real value for money. When the store opened, it was absolute chaos. Hams were ringing up as twenty-five cents, and a can of peas at twelve dollars. The whole shebang was a crazy mix of incredible deals on the one hand, and crazy gouging on the other.

This is definitely one of those occasions where we have to look deeper. God is not fooled by outward displays of piety, because God is constantly searching our hearts. Whatever was going on with the tax collector, his prayer was heard, not just because he was beating his breast in an act of contrition, but also because his heart was genuinely focused on God. Given the overwhelming weight of evidence that is filled by the words and deeds of Jesus’ own life, as well as that of the rest of Scripture, we have to realize that there’s more than just the obvious going on here. Perhaps what is really going on with the tax collector is more akin to an experience of being born again, and is very much a first step in a long journey to spiritual maturity.

That leaves us with the question of the faithful Pharisee. What exactly is happening with him? Why is Jesus so down on him? He's doing good things like praying, fasting, and truly honoring God as a good steward of his money by giving away a tenth of his income. There is absolutely no reason why Jesus would criticize his spiritual disciplines and generosity. In fact, Jesus constantly encourages such behavior in all of His disciples. The opening lines give us more information about what Jesus is getting at in this parable. It doesn't matter that the two characters are particular caricatures for his audience. That's the superficial skin-deep, outward stuff that we all need to get over. Parables are not really about the characters or situations portrayed. Rather, parables are mirrors for us to gaze into and see ourselves, not portraits of others. Sadly, for one who has come so far in his own spiritual journey, it is somewhat ironic that the Pharisee was so busy comparing himself to others. The Pharisee was lost in self: wandering up and down the various rooms in his personal gallery of achievements, peaking across at his neighbor's pitiful pencil sketch. His problem is spiritual pride, and it can happen to anyone, you, me, all of us, at any time on our own walk with God.

No one can deny that it makes us feel good to compare ourselves favorably with others. Listen to how it sounds, when we enter that bitter world of comparing our righteousness with our neighbors. So and so down the street is always coming home drunk; never washes his car; shouts at the kids; and wouldn't be seen dead helping his elderly neighbor in the winter. Jesus makes it perfectly clear, that this kind of comparative judgmentalism is wrong in God's eyes. We are neither competent nor qualified to be the judge of others. And when we indulge in this pointless exercise, we take our eyes off God, and essentially lower the bar to mere human standards. The result is that we become self-satisfied and complacent. Even worse, this type of behavior cuts us off from the Living Water, and our lives become like a stinking, mosquito infested, and stagnant pond. There is no growth, while we are wading around or even drowning in self-righteousness.

In another Peanuts cartoon strip, Lucy is confronted by a schoolmate, "Lucy, your mother says you're a natural born fuss-budget." To which Lucy vehemently replies, "Natural born nothing! She doesn't give me any credit. **I've worked hard to be what I AM!!!**" We all know an adamant Lucy. Most of us can probably even remember when we were the newly repentant tax collector, whose simple prayer for mercy is heard by God. Whether we identify with Lucy, the tax collector or feel that we are well along the path of spiritual growth and highly committed to our faith, like the Pharisee, this parable is an explicit warning against falling into the temptations of spiritual comparison, and games of moral superiority. As much as we all desire, and by the power of the Holy Spirit are being constantly transformed into Christ-likeness, we are not Christ, nor will we ever be perfect in this life in the way that only Christ could be. As John Claypool reminds us, "Perfection... comes as a promise [by God's grace], not as some achievement we create [or achieve] on our own." Authentic faithfulness is always looking towards God, fixing our gaze on Christ Jesus, and staying focused on God's desire for our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther King, Jr. closed many sermons with this prayer. Let us pray, "O God, I ain't what I ought to be, and I ain't what I'm gonna be, but by Your grace, I ain't what I used to be." By God's steadfast love and grace, may we all continue to grow in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.