

October 24, 2010

**The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 18.9-14

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector*

It should be noted that traditionally, Pharisee was not a synonym for “bad person” or “morally inept”. As the Pharisees have constantly taken the position of fall guy in so many of our Gospel stories, we interpreters of Scripture (and by that I mean all of us) run the risk of instantly seeing them as taking the wrong path.

The truth is, the Pharisees as a bunch were not necessarily bad people. They were committed to making the observance of Jewish law, often out of reach for the poor, available to all. They took a liberal view of scripture and tried to make their teachings accessible to everyone. I probably would have liked the Pharisees, honestly.

And conversely, because Jesus chose to hang out with tax collectors and prostitutes, we have come to sympathize with them, the honorable downtrodden. In each parable where a tax collector is mentioned, we assume that person is taking the better path, the one Jesus approves of. And because of that, the tax collector must be the more noble of the pair. The truth is, tax collectors on the whole were a bunch of swindlers, collecting not only the unfair taxes imposed by the state but their own share from those they preyed upon. They were more like the modern-day mafia than the IRS. They were, generally speaking, turncoats and bullies, the kind of folk you would not want to have around your children.

And yet, when we hear this parable, we instantly fill in the movie scene with the hard-hearted, self-serving Pharisee and the humble, repentant tax collector. Because that is what Jesus meant, after all, right? Well, not quite.

Jesus is using the extremes to illustrate his point. Everyone would have known the good Pharisees. And everyone would have known the nasty tax collectors. If the religious Pharisee can get it wrong and the n'er-do-well tax collector can get it right, then perhaps there's a message here for each one of us in between.

Our friend the Pharisee is not a bad person. He is a leader among his peers, he is generous with his resources. The problem, in the eyes of this parable, is not his observance or his piety, but his own inability to understand the necessity of his dependence on God for everything.

How true is that for each of us, too? It is so easy to believe that because we work hard are nice to others, because we come to church and say our prayers we are more worthy of God's love, that we deserve everything coming to us, that we have earned it, unlike that misfit over there, clearly lesser, dirtier, more sinful.

He's not so much a good guy, that tax collector, certainly not a leader in the community, probably not so generous. But in the parable Jesus offers, this character usually associated with all things smarmy changes the game.

He prays with an eye to his dependence of a merciful God. He prays with humility and honesty. He prays simply, but the simplicity of his prayer should not mask the difficulty inherent in praying it. "God have mercy on me, a sinner." Is a prayer that puts control of our lives and our well-being where it belongs: with God. And that is a great leap of faith.

This should be our intention each Sunday morning when we say our confession. The confession in our Book of Common prayer, like so much of our corporate worship, is a communal act, that is, we all do it together, confessing the sins of the community against God and against the larger world, but it is also an individual conversation between each of us and a God that loves us.

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you.

And how?

In our thoughts and words and deeds

In our actions and failure to act

In our decisions not to act in love to God and to neighbor.

It is easy to line up our sinful behaviors in our heads and tick them off one by one. "Okay, God, I cut someone off in traffic. I lied to my mother and I said something mean about my boss behind his back (but he deserved it). Forgive me please, amen."

Then we can leave church feeling better about our own piety, knowing that we, unlike those who slept in this morning, have been forgiven of our sins because we showed up to ask for it. A-hem.

But it is something else entirely to go into confession with a heart ready to turn back to God, with a full understanding not only of what we have done to turn away from God, but also the ways we have put our trust in things earthly, not things Godly.

When we go into confession in this way, with our hearts wide open, ready to be scrubbed clean, and with our lives ready to turn towards a God who is waiting for us with arms open, we will accept absolution with gratefulness and humility, perhaps with relief. Our sins are forgiven, our goodness is God's.

The thing to remember about those whom Jesus chose to avoid is not that they were unpleasant folks, but that their perception of their own goodness and piety overshadowed the work of God in their lives. They believed themselves to be in

control and they believed that their actions made them more holy, more loved, more forgiven in the eyes of God. And Jesus knew it just wasn't so.

The thing to remember about who Jesus chose to hang out with is not that he chose to hang out with an unsavory crowd of rotten people. The thing to remember about those particular prostitutes and tax collectors is that they were genuinely repentant.

They were open to turning their hearts and their lives.

They knew that they didn't get it right and they looked to God for help.

And when they were freed by forgiveness, they were grateful and they praised God for that forgiveness.

The truth is, we are forgiven. God forgives us more times than we can sin. We are forgiven, but it is when we come to understand our own lack of agency in that forgiveness, that we do nothing to earn it and we have no control over it, that genuine humility takes the place of spiritual pridefulness. Order is restored in our lives with God as the primary mover, the motivation and the reason for our being.