

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 25
Year C

Jeremiah 14:7-10
Psalm 84:1-6
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

We are probably all familiar with the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector in today's Gospel reading. We have probably always looked at the Pharisee as an arrogant person, looking down on the tax collector as some type of trash. But, is this fair? In the first century, the Pharisees were the ones who were trying to uphold the purity of the Jewish religion. It was their descendants who created the post-Temple style of worship that typifies Judaism today. On the other hand, the tax collectors were viewed as Roman collaborators who cheated their fellow Israelites at every chance. Therefore, the Pharisee was probably correct in his assessment of the tax collector, while he really was an upstanding citizen. So, why did Jesus hold the tax collector up as one who was justified through his prayer?

These two men are stereotypes of people we see every day. Perhaps we can relate to one of them ourselves. Do we tend to look at others, wondering how they can be as they are – less than someone we would invite to our house for dinner? Do we constantly compare ourselves to others? Or, do we look at ourselves critically, beating ourselves up for all the stupid mistakes we make in life? It is human nature to compare ourselves with others or with some ideal we carry in our heads. When we look in the mirror, what do we see?

One commentator pointed out the courage it took for Jesus to tell this parable. Imagine if I were to stand here and present a story about this wonderful member who did everything to help the church succeed and then compare him to a drug dealer. A story like that would not be well accepted. But, what Jesus is really asking us to do, is examine ourselves honestly. God is asking us to redefine what is good – not in outward actions, but in inward truthfulness. That can be scary. Really looking at our hearts truthfully, not trying to gloss over our flaws, is hard to do.

In the parable, the Pharisee cannot look into his own heart; he is too busy extolling his accomplishments. He is focused on how well he has fulfilled the letter of the Law, forgetting what God really seeks through the Law. In contrast, the tax collector can only see his failures. There is no pride, there is no boasting, there is just contrition. The tax collector has examined his own heart and seen the ways he has failed to follow God. That is why Jesus says he goes away justified.

Each Sunday, we say the General Confession. Before we begin, I always pause to give us a chance to review our week. Have we done all we can to further the Kingdom of God? Have we loved our neighbors as ourselves? Paul warns us about approaching the Eucharist unworthily. Part of our preparation is to examine our hearts and ask God to forgive us our shortcomings. Then, we are able to partake of the Communion with a clear conscience. For most of us, this General Confession and absolution in the service is enough. However, there may be a time when

you feel you need more assurance. For that, we have the Rite of Reconciliation, an opportunity for you to make a more complete confession in private and receive absolution. That is always available.

There are times we all fall into the mode of self-righteousness, when we feel like we are doing everything possible for the Kingdom of God, even better than those around us. There are also times when we beat ourselves up for all the negative things we see ourselves doing. None of us are perfect. God knows that. Therefore, we always have the opportunity to ask God to forgive us and set us back on track.