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Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 25, Year C
Sirach 35:12-17
2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner

If I was to say that we live in a very divided society, that we are deeply divided on issues of race, or gender, and especially across tribal lines of vicious politics, I wouldn't be saying anything particularly surprising or insightful. It is about as obvious as the noses on our faces.

Our division seems to be not just a matter of disagreeing on this or that thing, but a division that manifests in thinking terribly about those that disagree. Everything seems to be a matter of war, and all is fair, it is said, in that case. Again, this isn't particularly insightful, and I do it, too.

We might therefore approach today's parable from the gospel of Luke as an example of that kind of division, and why we should avoid it. In the parable, one somewhat hypocritical, religious person sees a less religious person in the Temple, and he looks down on him. He looks down on him because he is a tax collector, someone that people in the community don't like. In our present moment, we are particularly attuned to religious hypocrisy, and so that, combined with Jesus' affirmation of the tax collector, can make for us a relatively simple point: we shouldn't look down on people who are outcasts in our community, because those who are humble, like the tax collector, will be exalted, and those who are exalted, like the Pharisee, will be humbled, in the fullness of time. We shouldn't cast people out, we should bring them in.

This is true as far as it goes. But I think there is more to the parable than that, and I think looking at it closely will help us in our daily lives to draw closer to God in Christ.

Let's start with the Pharisee. Pharisees get a bad rap in the gospels, even from the lips of Jesus. They are hypocritical. They tell people what to do, but they don't do it themselves. They can tell you everything the Bible says, but they don't live it out. They use their positions of power to squash people they don't agree with. And they justify all of this through tortured reasoning and questionable Biblical analysis.

But the Pharisee in today's reading isn't quite like that. First, note where he is. He is in the Temple. And the parable says that he didn't go there to show off; he didn't go there to be hypocritical. He went there to pray, and indeed praying is what he is doing in the story. Praying is a good thing! It helps us draw closer to God as God draws closer to us.

What he is praying is a thanksgiving. He says, "God, thank you." In this case, thank you for having me not be like the people he sees around him: thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors. In other words, he isn't saying, "God, aren't I so great because I'm not like them?" He says, "God, thank you that I am not like them," that is, "thank you for making me the way I am." That's not a bad thing to pray, because he is acknowledging that the difference between himself and the tax collector is a difference that is due to the grace of God (as we might say). We sometimes put this as, "There but for the grace of God go I." That's what he's saying. Thank you, God, because if it wasn't for your grace, I could very well be bad off.

He isn't hypocritical about his teachings either, like the Pharisees are sometimes depicted as being—saying one thing and doing another. On the contrary, he practices what he preaches. He fasts twice a week, which means that he has an active spiritual discipline, and he tithes a tenth of his income, as God has commanded since the days of Abraham. Rather than using his position to enrich himself, in other words, he makes sacrifices as a reflection of his faith. Before we look down on him too much, we should ask ourselves if we make the same sacrifices. He does what God commands, and he thanks God for enabling him to do that, and that is a good and holy thing.

And the tax collector. Because of Jesus' inclination to spend time with tax collectors and sinner of various stripes, we can sometimes have our own inclination to see them as the good guys in these stories, the victims of religious hypocrisy. But tax collectors were not victims. These were not IRS agents or faceless bureaucrats. They were collaborators with an occupying army that periodically oppressed the Hebrews, sometimes violently. The tax collectors used that collaboration to enrich themselves personally. Tax collectors would collect taxes, sure; but they would collect more than the tax bill. If an individual owed \$100, the tax collector would demand \$200, and pocket the difference. They were more like gangsters extorting protection money than IRS agents. They were more like collaborators in Vichy France, actively supporting the Nazi government.

Like gangsters, they followed up their requests with threats of physical violence, which they sometimes carried out. So it wasn't that tax collectors were disliked because they were misunderstood; people didn't like them because they would beat up people who wouldn't, or couldn't, pay them bribes. When the Pharisee sees the tax collector, he is seeing someone who very well could have attacked physically or at least impoverished people he knew. The Pharisee's tithe went to helping poor people; the tax collector went around making poorer people poorer. These thuggish, Vichy collaborators were not victims. They hurt people.

But something was going on inside this tax collector. He was in the Temple, too. And he couldn't even look up to heaven because of his shame, but beat his breast, and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Well, perhaps he should be ashamed. That's a reasonable thing for him to be.

But Jesus says that this tax collector went home justified, and the Pharisee did not. Why would that be?

I want to suggest that the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector is that one of them recognized the truth—that he is a sinner—and the other did not. That one of them knew himself, and the other did not. One of them understood his right relationship with God, and that he fell short of it, and the other thought he was pretty much okay, but he wasn't. One of them recognized his need for God's mercy, and the other thought he was all set as he was.

In the Greek tragedies about Oedipus, Oedipus goes to the Oracle at Delphi, who gives him the injunction, "Know thyself." If he doesn't know himself, he will perish. Tax collector, Pharisee: know thyself. One of them does, and the other one does not. The Pharisee is not wrong: it is good to pray and give thanks to God and practice the spiritual disciplines of fasting and tithing to help grow in one's relationship to God. He is right about that, and all of us, I imagine, should do more of it.

But the tax collector prays this prayer: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He addresses his prayer to the right person: God. And he asks for the right thing: mercy. And he knows himself: a sinner. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And, Jesus says, he goes home justified in the eyes of God.

This prayer of the tax collector is sometimes combined with another prayer found in the Gospel of Luke, that of a blind man who calls out to Jesus, insistently and annoyingly for the people around him: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" (Luke 18:35-43). Jesus, Son of David, have

mercy on me. Son of David, not Son of God: that hasn't been revealed to that blind man yet. But Jesus grants him his prayer.

The mash-up of these two prayers is sometimes called the Jesus Prayer, and it can go something like this: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." For at least 1,500 years, people have been praying this prayer: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Repeating it over and over: Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner; Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. This can be helpful.

Because here is a thing that is true: praying is hard. I remember hearing someone say one time, somewhat derisively, about a community of nuns I used to know, "What do they do, just sit around and pray all the time?" And no, that's not all they would do, but even if it was, have you ever "sat around" and prayed for long periods of time? Without your mind wandering. Or going over and over some thing that is going on in your life. Try praying for five minutes straight, the friend said. Try remaining focused on Christ and your relationship with him, and only that, for five minutes. You might find that praying is hard if you didn't know it already.

For those of us who find it hard, we have the Jesus Prayer. It is simple, and it is sufficient. It calls on Jesus as Jesus, a personal name of a specific person. And it calls on him as Christ, as the Messiah. Then it refers to his right relationship to God the Father: "Jesus Christ, Son of God." And then it asks for the only thing that needs to be asked for: "Have mercy on me." Mercy: another word for grace. Whatever is going on in your life, whatever your situation, good, bad, or ugly, if you're young or old, at the beginning of life or at its end, this is what we need more than anything else: the mercy of God. And it concludes with an acknowledgment of the reality of the one who is making the prayer: "have mercy on me, a sinner." Whether we have the right political opinions while everyone else has the wrong ones, or if we're smarter than they are, or have the right values, no matter what, know thyself: me, a sinner.

You might find, as many people have, that this prayer can get you through a lot, good times and bad. If praying is hard, this is a good prayer to use. Traditional practice is simply to repeat it, over and over. "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." When you get out of bed in the morning, as you make your way through your day, when your head hits the pillow at night: Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. The bells around here ring on every half-hour. And if I hear it, and remember what is important, I will say this prayer three or four times. Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

It can become a routine, but the kind of routine that isn't just routine, if you know what I mean. A routine that can draw you closer to God through Christ. I commend this prayer to you, as a non-routine routine, and I'd like us to practice it together.

So pray with me. I will say it once, and then you repeat it after me. Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Now three times, all together: Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Now three times, silently.

Now for a period of time, silently.

Amen.