

Sermon for Proper 25C  
Sunday, October 23, 2022  
“God’s People in God’s Kingdom”

Text: Luke 18:9-14

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The two characters in today’s gospel parable are a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Bible passage is part of a collection of parables in which Jesus described the kingdom of God. “The coming of the kingdom of God,” Jesus said to the Pharisees, “is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the Kingdom of God is in your midst.” (NIV) In other words, Jesus was explaining that the Kingdom of God was already around them, but they just couldn’t recognize it. Jesus then presented four vignettes, or little stories, to show them what the Kingdom of God looks like. Today’s parable from Luke’s Gospel is part of that set of four vignettes, two of which were stories and two were parables. The first was the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge that was our gospel lesson last week, in which Jesus encouraged them to pray with persistence and not to give up. Then Jesus presented the second parable, which we just heard today in which he spoke about humility. It is followed by two stories that echo the theme of humility by praising the innocence of children and by showing the importance of humility in order to follow him. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” (NIV) Jesus pointed out. All of these vignettes involve role reversal: the persons whom Jesus praised were the persons whom society marginalized for being insignificant or disloyal: the widow, the tax collector, children, the poor.

The two characters in today’s gospel are a Pharisee and a tax collector. In the mind of a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jew, Pharisees were supposed to be the “good guys.” They were pious, they knew the Scriptures and interpreted them strictly, and they strove to make observance of the Torah—the Law—available to everyone. They were thought to be the people who did things the right way. But, the Pharisee in today’s reading is the bad guy; he boasts about how good he is, how he prays the right way, and isn’t like the other guy, the tax collector. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were supposed to be the bad guys. They were disliked because they were seen as disloyal for collaborating with the Roman government to collect taxes for them; not only that, they were known to violate the commandments in the Torah against usury by collecting taxes higher than what a person owed and pocketing the extra. They were often dishonest and ruthless. But, the tax collector in today’s gospel simply asked for mercy and forgiveness, without any strings attached, approaching Jesus with great humility. Jesus pointed out that tax collector was the one who was justified simply because of his humility. The one who was supposed to be the correct one made his righteousness and piety all about himself, and not about God.

Well-intentioned Christians can sometimes be like the Pharisee. We like to brag to people on how good we are because we go to church every week, we say our prayers, we do good things for other folks, and sometimes we feel justified because we aren't like "those people." (Whoever *they* are.) There are a lot of Christians who like to go around boasting about how good they are, while at the same time, pointing fingers and judging other people, their actions, or their lifestyle. We like to do that, because it makes us feel good. It makes us feel *justified*. But Jesus is telling us, "No. That's not what the Kingdom of God is all about. Just going through the motions won't win us a place in the Kingdom." Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation theologian, talked about "fictitious faith" in his sermon on this gospel passage. Faith that is so focused on going through the motions that it misses the opportunity for God to work in us and through us—for us to be participants *in* and inhabitants *of* the Kingdom of God. Luther praised the tax collector by saying that he "is on the right road and is twice justified; once through faith before God, and again by his works to me. Here he gives unto God his glory, and by faith repays him with praise. Also toward me he performs the duty of love, and puts words into my mouth and teaches me how to pray." Being a good Christian isn't simply about coming to church every week, or putting money in the collection plate, or praying several times a day, or even being good to our neighbor—although all those things are very important. What this Gospel passage teaches us that we do those things not to make us look good in the eyes of others, but rather, to glorify God. We don't need to brag, because how we live will speak for itself.

Instead, we are to come before God with humility, like the tax collector, who simply asked for God's mercy to make him a better person. That's what all of us should want—for God in his mercy to make us better people. What that would look like is going to be different for each of us. We could want to be more loving, more generous, more consistent in our devotional practice, more helpful to someone, less contrary, less anxious, less worried, less disillusioned, less concerned about what other people think or how we look in someone else's eyes.

We should ask God to help us to be less like the Pharisee who brought attention to himself and was more concerned about what he did than who he was. Modern society is way too focused on the self and the individual. We spend a great deal of time making it known what I want. We are more concerned with our personal rights than things that will benefit the whole of society and the world. Our selfish desires allow us to put others down, perpetuate poverty, and overlook injustice. We want to keep all of our money and not help those who can't *or won't* help themselves. Or perhaps we are like to have things go our way. We don't want to work together with others, but we'd prefer to go it alone and have things done the way we want. And then there are those times when we want the spotlight on the me and we want the world to know it. We boast about all the things we do for the church. We want to make sure we get the credit

for all that we do and we get all bent out of shape when we don't. It's all about me, me, me, and where there is too much "I" there is too little God.

You don't have to have all the right answers. Maybe you're faced with a decision and you're not sure what to do. Maybe you're going through something challenging or difficult in your life. The story of the Pharisee and the Publican reassures us that all God needs us to do is come before him in humility, speaking from the heart, and ask him in his mercy to make us a better person, to help us make the hard decisions, to ease our anxiety about the things we worry about. And in the end, we must trust God to take it from there. Amen.

### Resources

*Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Volume 4), commentary for Proper 25.

SermonWriter (<http://www.lectionary.org/SW/10-27bx/Luke.18.9-14.htm>)

<http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity11/LutherGospel.html>