

St Thomas' Church of the Air  
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Trinity XI  
r mcneely+

*For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased  
And he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*

There once was a man who was very wicked, rebellious and lost. He decided it would be good for business if he joined a church in his town. Now he had never been a church member in his life. He was an embezzler, an adulterer and a liar but he found an evangelical church and when the time came he went down to the altar to testify and to join the church.

He told them all there was no sin in his life and that he had grown up in the church and had been saved by Jesus.

He was welcomed in and everyone celebrated.

The man went home and proudly told his wife that he had conned the Christians and was now a member of the Church.

His wife was a godly woman who was furious at what he had done. She exploded and scolded him for being such a hypocrite.

Demanded that he go back the next week and confess who he really was.

Well, God used his wife to really break him and the man returned to Church.

He went up to the altar again and this time told the people he had lied last week and that he had never been a church member in his life, that he was an embezzler and adulterer and a liar and that he was sorry to have deceived them.

Well the people were very angry, revoked his membership on the spot and threw him out.

When he got home his wife asked him how it went.

The man thought for a minute and said  
You know, those people are really strange  
When I told them a lie, they invited me in  
And when I told them the truth they threw me out.

In today's Gospel, Jesus told a story of two men in a similar situation

One who tried to talk his way into heaven  
But didn't make it  
And one who tried to talk himself out of heaven  
But did make it.

The Gospel is a story that Jesus directs to people who think themselves better than others.

People who think the good life they lead will earn their way into heaven.

So if you have ever looked at people who do not go to church  
And thought you were better than they are because you go to church every Sunday  
Jesus is talking to you today.

If you have ever looked at people who are homeless  
And thought you were better than they are because you have the same roof over your head each night.  
Jesus is talking to you today

If you have ever seen people in prison and thought you were better than they are because you have not been incarcerated  
Jesus is talking to you today.

If you ever looked down your nose at anyone for any reason and thought you were better than they were

Jesus is talking to you today.

I fear that if we are honest  
 every one of us  
 must confess that  
 at some point in our lives  
 we have fallen into the  
 I am better than they are  
 Way of thinking  
 Jesus is talking to us today.

St Luke gives us the parable that Jesus told of the Pharisee and the Publican.

On the surface the parable is a story about humility.  
 But the meat of it is about Grace (that gift from God that brings us closer to Him)

And it is about  
 God forgiving what He cannot excuse.  
 It is about our salvation  
 depending not on what we can achieve  
 But upon  
 what we are willing to receive.

We are not saved by our works  
 But by God's work.

It is a story that says;  
 No matter how good you are  
 It is not enough to get in to heaven  
 And no matter how bad you are  
 It is not enough to keep you out.

It is a story that says

God does not judge you in comparison to another man  
He judges all of us  
In comparison to Jesus.

Let's dig in to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

There are two people in the parable: the first is a Pharisee  
that sect of the Jews  
who exaggerated the letter of the laws  
and believed that strict and absolute compliance would  
literally buy favor with God.

We think of them as those who came to worship the law more than  
they worshiped God.

But they were the highest of Jewish society  
and were revered for their piety and wisdom.  
People bowed to them as they walked in the street.  
As if they were royalty.

The second man is a publican.

He was also a Jew,  
but worked for the Romans  
to collect taxes from the Jews  
and paid them over to the Roman authorities.

It was common for publicans to collect more from the Jews than  
was owed to the Romans and pocket the difference. If the tax was  
not or could not be paid, the Publican could confiscate property.  
Publicans could also take the wives and daughters of delinquent  
taxpayers for their own nefarious purposes. They could also turn  
the taxpayer over to the brutal Roman soldiers. Threats and  
extortion were the rule of the day.

As you might imagine,

publicans were violently hated  
 and ridiculed (not without good reason)  
 because they were seen as both  
 traitors  
 and thieves.

So what is this loathsome sinner doing in the Temple?

An interesting choice for one of the men in the parable.

Jesus puts the two men in motion:

The Pharisee is in the heart of the temple.

We can imagine that there were a number of men praying in the temple

(remember the women were excluded).

In the fashion of the time, he stood up to pray and. we could expect that he raised his hands

and looked up to heaven as he spoke his prayer.

The publican would not come near the other men, but stood far off.

Separated by class

Status

Or ridicule

He would not lift his eyes from the floor  
 and with his hands he beat his chest.

Jesus gives voice to the two men and we begin to see more contrast;

We hear the Pharisee's prayer in which he:

Lists vices from which he abstains or which he attributes to the Publican:

Extortion

unjustice

Adultery

Or sins committed by people like this publican here

Then he lists some pious practices in which he engages:

I fast twice a week (well beyond what was expected)  
 I tithe upon all I possess (not just on the designated  
 income)

We have no reason to believe the Pharisee's statement is not  
 accurate.

His fasting

and piety;  
 his compliance with God's laws  
 are not something to be ignored  
 and not to be disdained.

And it is important to note that the Pharisee is not hypocritical. In  
 the parable he is all that he boasts that he is.

But he is on the wrong track,

his prayer is only about himself.  
 He all but congratulates God  
 on the excellence of His servant.

He glances at God but contemplates himself and that God is in his  
 debt.

He perceives a bargain in which  
 he has done more  
 Than the bargain required  
 And God is in his debt.

The spirit of his prayer is all wrong.

He is smug  
 Self-satisfied  
 And believes he is in no need of grace.

He doesn't need God,

Because his confidence is clearly in himself.

His prayer asks for nothing other than for God to be impressed  
 with his vast accomplishments. For which he takes all the credit.

In Prayer as in everything else we do,

it matters what we do  
 but the spirit in which we do it is of equal concern.  
 In Christianity the ends never justify the means.

Even righteous acts without compassion are not considered  
 righteous by God.

*For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased*

Let's turn to the publican's prayer:  
 "God be merciful to me, a sinner".

He makes no excuses,  
     Cites no mitigating circumstances,  
     Offers no explanation.  
 He takes full responsibility for his acts  
     and his sin  
     and he seeks God's mercy.

For the publican to ask for forgiveness  
     and restoration of his relationship with God  
 is a bold  
     and faith filled  
 act-- for a man so despised by his society.

He needs no help in pointing out his sins  
     Harbors no illusions  
     Makes no claim on God's favor.

He comes empty handed;  
     Nothing to brag about  
     Nothing to offer but his sins.

He is humble and repentant ,  
     but his faith has made him bold  
     to ask for something

that he has no right to expect—forgiveness and restoration with God.

*and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted*

Jesus now pronounces judgment, speaking of the publican:

“I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.”

“Justified” in the King James Bible means: to be as if innocent in the eyes of God.

By his faith, the publican leaves the temple cleansed of his sins, as if they never occurred; the blood of Christ has blotted them out. Jesus shed the same blood on the same cross for both the good and the bad, even a Publican.

The Pharisee’s pride led him to believe that he was on equal footing with his creator and could enter into a bargain with God. He saw God only as a scorekeeper:

As long as he obeys the rules  
He was self confident of heavenly life.

But our confidence is in God not self.

In today’s Epistle, St Paul describes the role of grace that we see in the publican. He lists all the people who saw the risen Jesus and then says that he saw him last, as if he were born out of time. He describes himself as the least of the apostles,

not meet to even be called an apostle.

He cites as the reason;

that he persecuted the Church.



He says “I am what I am and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain. I labored more abundantly than them all. Yet he reminds us, “not I but the grace of God which was with me”.

Paul knows

of his abundant labor

and of all the Churches that he established.

He knows that his accomplishments exceed those of other apostles.

But unlike the Pharisee

Paul knows that it was only by the grace of God,

that gift from God

that brought Paul closer to Him;

it was only by that grace

that Paul labored.

It was only by that grace

that Paul accomplished so much for us

and for the Church.

The Pharisee would have listed all his accomplishments and exalted only himself and told God how much better he was than the others;

Paul says he shouldn't even be called an apostle and that his labor was by the grace of God.

The contrast between the Pharisee and the Publican is not between hypocrisy and humility. As we have seen the Pharisee is no hypocrite—all he said of himself was true.

The lesson for us is that  
The Pharisee's condemnation lay  
In his presumption of making  
An equation between his own good works  
And the exalted grace of God.

The Publican realized, and we too must know  
the incommensurable difference  
between  
God's holiness  
And his own abasement.

The Publican recognized that it was  
Not equitable justice  
But only  
The infinity of divine compassion  
That could balance his equation.

We must pray every day "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner".

The Pharisee left the temple as he had come in.  
The publican left a new man.

Will we?

