

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2022
LUKE 18:9-14

OUR GOSPEL LESSON BEGINS LIKE THIS, “JESUS TOLD THIS PARABLE TO SOME WHO TRUSTED IN THEMSELVES THAT THEY WERE RIGHTEOUS AND REGARDED OTHERS WITH CONTEMPT.” (LUKE 18:9)

LET’S ADMIT RIGHT FROM THE START THAT WE ALL DO THIS AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER IN OUR LIVES – IT’S HUMAN NATURE TO TRY AND FIGURE OUT HOW WE MEASURE UP AGAINST OTHER PEOPLE, AND IN DOING SO, TO MAKE OURSELVES APPEAR TO BE JUST A LITTLE BETTER THAN WE REALLY ARE. ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS GO TO SOCIAL MEDIA TO WATCH THIS PLAY OUT. THERE ARE ENDLESS POSTS ABOUT THE PERFECT FAMILY ON THE PERFECT VACATION WEARING THE PERFECT CLOTHES AND ALL THE CHILDREN ARE PERFECTLY ADORABLE AND PERFECTLY BEHAVED. PERFECT! WE THINK THAT THE MORE PERFECT WE APPEAR THROUGH OUR STATUS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS, THE HIGHER WE ARE ON THE LADDER, THE BETTER WE ARE. THE MORE BLESSED BY GOD. THE MORE WE MATTER.

BUT WHAT WE DON’T SEE IS THE MESS WHEN THE CAMERA ISN’T RECORDING, THE MESS IN THE KITCHEN, THE MESS IN RELATIONSHIPS, THE MESS AT WORK OR SCHOOL. THE MESS! BECAUSE GOD FORBID ANYONE SHOULD SEE THE REALITY BEHIND THE SPECIAL FILTERS TO MAKE US PRETTIER, SLIMMER, SHINIER, MORE PERFECT. GOD FORBID ANYONE SEE THE MESS.

AND YET TIME AND AGAIN, JESUS TURNS THIS TEACHING ON ITS EAR BY SPENDING MOST OF HIS TIME WITH THOSE WHOM SOCIETY HAS DEEMED A MESS. YOU KNOW, THE OUTCASTS – LEPERS, PROSTITUTES, FOREIGNERS, THE POOR AND THE LAME – ALL OF THEM WERE THE SPECIAL FOCUS OF HIS ATTENTION. HE WANTED THEM TO KNOW THAT THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES DID NOT DETERMINE THEIR VALUE AS PERSONS, BECAUSE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM MATTERED IMMENSELY TO GOD.

AND SO JESUS TELLS THIS PARABLE TO THOSE WHO TRUSTED IN THEMSELVES THAT THEY WERE RIGHTEOUS AND REGARDED OTHERS WITH CONTEMPT. “TWO MEN WENT UP TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY, ONE A PHARISEE, AND THE OTHER A TAX COLLECTOR.”

JESUS IS SETTING US UP – THIS PARABLE IS A TRAP – BOTH FOR ME AS THE PREACHER AND YOU AS THE HEARER. THE MORAL OF THIS STORY IS SO CLEAR, IT’S HARD TO MISS – “DON’T THINK TOO HIGHLY OF YOURSELF LIKE THE PHARISEE – BE HUMBLE LIKE THE TAX COLLECTOR.

BUT HERE'S THE THING – WHENEVER A PARABLE SEEMS THIS CLEAR, THIS SIMPLE AND THIS STRAIGHTFORWARD, WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT JEUS' PARABLES ARE MASTERY AT REVERSALS. THINGS NEVER STAY AS THEY ARE FOR LONG IN HIS STORIES. SO LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AND SEE WHAT WE SHALL SEE...

THE PHARISEE WAS ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY. TRUSTWORTHY AND MORALLY UPRIGHT ACCORDING TO THE LAW. HE ONLY SPEAKS THE TRUTH – HE **IS** RIGHTEOUS. HE LEADS A LIFE BLAMELESS - AGAIN, ACCORDING TO THE LAW. HE **DOES** FAST AND GIVE ALMS AND TRULY BEARS NO RESEMBLANCE TO THE TAX COLLECTOR WITH WHICH HE COMPARES HIMSELF. HE'S DIFFERENT. SO WHAT'S HIS PROBLEM?

WELL, BECAUSE HE HAS ESTABLISHED HIS OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS, BY LISTING ALL THE THINGS HE **DOES**, HE DOES NOT NEED GOD. HE'S NOT DOING ANYTHING THAT IS WRONG – BUT REMEMBER HOW THE GOSPEL BEGINS TODAY? IT WAS TOLD TO SOME WHO TRUSTED IN THEMSELVES THAT THEY WERE RIGHTEOUS. THE PROBLEM IS THAT THEY BELIEVE THEY HAVE NO PARTICULAR NEED FOR ANYTHING FROM GOD, EXCEPT PERHAPS TO AFFIRM AND BLESS THEIR RIGHTEOUSNESS. IN OTHER WORDS, WHILE HE'S ABSOLUTELY RIGHT ABOUT THE KIND OF LIFE HE SHOULD LIVE, HE IS CONFUSED ABOUT THE SOURCE OF THAT LIFE.

AND THERE'S ANOTHER PROBLEM – THE PHARISEE NOT ONLY USES THE LAW TO DESCRIBE **WHAT HE SHOULD DO** – FAST, PRAY, GIVE A PORTION OF HIS INCOME AWAY – HE ALSO USES THE LAW TO DEFEND **WHO HE IS** – AND WHO OTHERS ARE AS WELL.

BECAUSE WHILE HE PRAYS TO GOD, HIS PRAYER IS ALL ABOUT HIMSELF, AND BECAUSE HE MISSES THE SOURCE OF HIS BLESSING, HE DESPISES THOSE VERY PEOPLE WHOM GOD LOVES, BECAUSE HE CANNOT IMAGINE THAT HE IS ALSO LIKE THEM – HE MISSES THAT THEY HAVE A MUTUAL NEED – A SHARED DEPENDENCE ON GOD'S MERCY AND GRACE.

AND SO HE LEAVES THE TEMPLE AS RIGHTEOUS – ACCORDING TO LAW – AS WHEN HE ENTERED – BUT HE IS NOT JUSTIFIED AND CALLED RIGHTEOUS BY GOD – FOR IT WOULD NEVER OCCUR TO HIM TO ASK.

THEN THERE'S THE TAX COLLECTOR - HE WAS A CROOK. A JEW WHO WORKED FOR THE ROMAN GOVERNMENT. HE COULD CHARGE THE PEOPLE WHATEVER HE WANTED AS LONG AS CEASAR GOT HIS CUT. SO HE WAS RICH. BUT HE WAS ALSO DESPISED AS A TRAITOR. THERE IS NO NOTE OF REPENTANCE IN HIS PRAYER, NO PLEDGE TO LEAVE HIS CROOKED JOB OR PAY BACK WHAT HE SHOULD TO THOSE HE CHEATED, NO PROMISE OF A NEW AND BETTER LIFE. NOTHING

EXCEPT THE SIMPLE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT HE IS UTTERLY AND ENTIRELY DEPENDENT ON GOD'S MERCY.

AND THIS IS WHERE HE GETS IT RIGHT – HE KNOWS HIS NEED – HE KNOWS HIS FAILING, HE KNOWS HIS WEAKNESS – AND HE KNOWS HIS ABSOLUTE DEPENDENCE ON GOD FOR ALL GOOD THINGS – BUT ESPECIALLY FOR THE GIFT OF MERCY. THAT'S IT. HE DOESN'T REPENT – HE JUST ASKS FOR MERCY. HE KNOWS FULL WELL HIS HUMAN FAILINGS AND ABSOLUTE NEED AND SO IS AWARE OF HIS DEPENDENCE ON GOD'S MERCY AND GRACE.

THE TAX COLLECTOR KNOWS THE ONE THING THE PHARISEE DOES NOT – HIS LIFE IS GOD'S – HIS PAST, HIS PRESENT, HIS FUTURE – THEY ARE ALL ENTIRELY DEPENDENT ON GOD – ON HIS MERCY – ON HIS GRACE.

AND THIS, MY FRIENDS SEEMS TO BE THE ONLY THING THAT SPEARATES THESE TWO MEN – ONE DOESN'T NEED GOD, AND SO, WHILE RIGHTEOUS ACCORDING TO HIS OWN USE OF THE LAW, HE IS NOT JUSTIFIED – HE DOESN'T STAND IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD – THE OTHER ONE KNOWS HIS NEED, ASKS FOR MERCY, AND GOES HOME JUSTIFIED BY GOD.

AND SO THE TRAP – BECAUSE THE MINUTE YOU DECIDE TO TAKE THIS PARABLE TO HEART AND “BE HUMBLE” LIKE THE PHARISEE, IT'S PRETTY HARD TO NOT ALSO BE GRATEFUL THAT YOU'RE NOT LIKE HIM. AND THEN THE TRAP HAS SPRUNG – SEE, IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU – NOT YOUR HUMILITY, OR LACK OF PRIDE, OR EVEN ABOUT HOW YOU ARE JUSTIFIED OR RIGHTEOUS – IT'S ABOUT GOD.

OR PERHAPS YOU HEAR THE TAX COLLECTOR'S CONFESSION AS THE EXAMPLE OF HOW WE “OUGHT” TO LIVE OUR LIVES COMPLETELY AWARE OF OUR STATUS AS A SINNER. BUT THE MINUTE WE DO THAT, OUR ATTENTION SHIFTS AWAY FROM GOD'S ACTIVITY TO OUR OWN STATUS. AND THE TRAP IS SPRUNG ONE MORE TIME. ONCE AGAIN, IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU – NOT ABOUT BEING A SINNER OR A WRETCH, OR ONE WHO DOESN'T DESERVE OR MERIT GOD'S GRACE, OR HOWEVER YOU WANT TO WALLOW – IT JUST DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU – BUT IT HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH GOD.

BECAUSE IN GOD, THERE IS NO LADDER TO CLIMB, NO COMPARISONS TO MAKE – THERE'S ONLY THE CROSS, THROUGH WATER AND THE WORD, TO WHICH WE ARE JOINED TO JESUS' DEATH – THROUGH THAT SAME WATER AND THE WORD, WE ARE RAISED UP TO NEW LIFE. THIS NEWNESS IS GOD'S GIFT OF GRACE AND MERCY.

AND IN THIS NEW LIFE, THERE IS NO NEED TO GLANCE SIDEWAYS WHEN WE PRAY – NO NEED TO COMPARE OURSELVES TO SOMEONE ELSE – NO NEED TO FRANTICALLY ACHIEVE SO THAT WE CAN CLIMB HIGHER ON THE LADDER THAN OTHERS.

TWO MEN WENT UP TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY – IT COULD BE ANY TWO OF US WHO PRAY BEFORE THE LORD – AND ALL THAT WILL MATTER, JESUS SAYS, IS WHETHER YOU KNOW YOUR NEED FOR HIM AND ASK FOR MERCY. IT'S THAT SIMPLE – AND THAT DIFFICULT.

WE ARE NOT WORTHY. BUT CHRIST MAKES US WORTHY. IN HIM WE ARE ACCEPTED, LOVED, RECONCILED AND MADE RIGHTEOUS.

WHEN WE PRAY, THEN, WE ARE TRULY FREE TO THANK GOD – NOT THAT WE ARE BETTER THAN SO-AND-SO, BUT THAT HIS MERCY HAS BEEN SHOWN TO US.

HIS GOODNESS MAKES US GOOD.

TRUSTING THAT, WE RETURN HOME JUSTIFIED. IN JESUS' NAME. AMEN.