

Joel 2:23-32

Psalm 65

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Luke 18:9-14

Last Thursday, I had the great pleasure of being present at the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for the brand new, multi-million dollar state-of-the-art Homeless Shelter that has been built by the Fairfax County government and is due to open on November 1. It is quite spectacular. I hope each one of you will have a chance to visit it soon. It's a remarkable structure. All of us in the audience had a chance to tour the facility when the ceremony was over and there were lots of conversations around the need for such a place and the plight of people who find themselves without a home. It wasn't said very often, but it seemed apparent that so many of us were looking at these beautiful surroundings being provided for those who lack the very basics in our community and, I'm sure, more than one person thought to themselves.... "There but for the grace of God go I." After the tour, when I was walking back to St. Paul's, I started thinking about our gospel lesson for this week. It's a parable about those who are the 'inside' of society [like those of us who helped build the shelter and support it] and those who are on the 'outside' of society [like the ones who need the shelter].

The parable that we just heard in Luke is a clear-cut parable about those who are on the 'inside' and those who are on the 'outside.' We hear from Jesus about a Pharisee who is praying in the Temple. He is a law-abiding, religious man who has set himself apart from others to serve God...to be devoted to God...to keep the law...to be a good example to others...and by all measures is, indeed, a very righteous man. He is conscientious in his devotion to God and he doesn't make any mistakes. He does exactly what he is supposed to do and he serves God faithfully. By all appearances he is on the 'inside' of religious life in the Temple.

On the other hand, Jesus also tells us about a tax collector standing in the back of the Temple unable to lift his eyes to heaven out of shame for all the miserable things he has done and all the mistakes he has made. He is, by all accounts, on the 'outside' of Temple life. We hear a lot about tax collectors in Jesus' teachings and we know that they are despised by their communities. Sometimes we don't realize that these tax collectors are not white-collared IRS representatives. These tax collectors are free-lancers working for the Roman government and gouging their fellow citizens by extracting from them not a set fee, but all they could get. These tax collectors are colluding with an oppressive government to keep these occupied citizens in poverty and precariously close to complete ruin and near death at all times. These tax collectors were profiting from a miserably unjust system to increase the pain and suffering of

their fellow citizens all the while living comfortably themselves. To say that they were the scum of the earth is to elevate their position. They were dirt in the eyes of their neighbors and they were despised for good reason. It's only logical to know that these tax collectors were most definitely on the 'outside' of Temple life. So this tax collector is desperate when he comes and stands at the back of the Temple...not daring to go inside...and confesses to God his miserable state and throws himself on God's mercy. He doesn't repent of his sins. He doesn't promise to do better. He doesn't even ask for forgiveness. He says simply, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The Pharisee, on the other hand, thanks God that he is not like this miserable tax collector. He thanks God that he is not like other people. He's not a lawbreaker. He keeps the law. He gives to the Temple a tenth of his income. He worships at the Temple regularly. He reads the Scripture. He's not a thief or an adulterer or a murderer. He's a righteous man. He's right about that! And you can almost hear him saying as he looks at the tax collector, "There but for the grace of God go I." But I am blessed by God. I make good decisions and I obey the Law.

This parable is pretty straightforward, isn't it? It's wrong to be cocky and God justifies the humble. But it's a trap. We know that the Pharisees have a reputation for being at odds with Jesus. It's easy for us to see them as the 'bad guys.' They seem always to be missing the point. The same is true in this parable. The Pharisee is missing the point. And as we sit comfortably and listen to this story how many of us are quietly saying to ourselves, "Thank you, God, that I am not like this cocky, self-righteous Pharisee"oh, yeah, right!

Gotcha'

If we aren't careful, we'll get pulled into this trap. Thank you, God, that I am not like this cocky, self-righteous Pharisee. You see, it's not that this Pharisee is not a righteous man. He is. He's a good man by any of the standards that we use to determine who is holy and who is devout and who is not. But Jesus does not justify this holy, good man. Jesus justifies this miserable, good-for-nothing scoundrel of a tax collector. And why?

Because this parable is not about the nature of the righteous and the un-righteous. This parable is about the nature of God. This is a parable about God's unwillingness to divide us into those on the inside and those on the outside. This is a parable about God's love for each one of us and his special care and concern for the humble.

The difference in the outcome in this parable is in who takes or gets the credit for righteousness. The Pharisee is a righteous man. There's no question about that. And he even

thanks God for the fact that he's a righteous man, but at no time does the Pharisee ever concede his dependence on God. At no time does the Pharisee ever say, "Without you, Lord, I am nothing at all!" The Pharisee is relying on his own judgement, his own choices and his own good conduct to produce his righteousness when, in fact, the only source of righteousness is our relationship with God. It's about the relationship; it's not about how good we are although I'm sure God is pleased when we are making an effort to be good. Our righteousness is about our relationship with God and our awareness of our dependence on God and our need for God. We don't earn our way into God's good graces. Like any relationship it is built on communication and attention and intention.

That's the whole point of this parable. It's not whether or not the Pharisee is good and the tax collector is bad. The whole point is that the Pharisee depends on himself and his good behavior to construct a relationship with God which is really no relationship at all. The Pharisee is approaching all of his choices as if it is his own effort that makes him worthy of a relationship with God, not God's love for him as God's creation.

We can't earn our way into God's good graces. We can only love our way into God's good graces. The miserable tax collector is painfully aware of how much he is dependent upon God; of how much he is at God's mercy; how miserably he has failed to be 'good enough' to earn God's love when it's not about earning God's love at all. It's about accepting God's love and acknowledging our dependence on God.

And our good fortune...our comfortable station in life...is not a measure of how much God loves us because God loves the destitute as well. As a matter of fact, God loves with even greater passion the destitute and expects us to love them and care for them as well. Our good fortune is simply that...our good fortune. And certainly, we can look back on decisions in our life and see that we made some wise ones. But the fact that we made wise decisions does not make us more valuable to God who is going to love us whether we make wise decisions or not. What makes us valuable to God is simply the fact that we are God's creation and God loves all of his creation.

What pleases God, according to this deceptive little parable from Jesus, is that we are beholden to God...we are dependent upon God...we know that we do no good thing without the love and support of God...and we give credit where credit is due...not to our own efforts, but to God's enormous love for us. The only thing we need to be proud of is the fact that God loves us. Our right relationship with God is what makes us righteous...not our good behavior. Our humility before God is what feeds that relationship. Our gratitude to God is what nourishes that relationship. Our attention to God and our interest in God and our willingness to keep God at

the center of our lives is what sustains that relationship. Our good behavior is our gift to God in gratitude for all that God has provided to us and for all the strength that God has given us and for the open heart that God nourishes within us. We do good not because we want God to love us, but because we love God.

We need never think to ourselves, "There but for the grace of God go I." For each and every one of us owes our very existence to the grace of God whatever our station in life might be. And our truly humble hearts keep us connected to the God who loves us and justifies us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.