

## Proper 25, Year C

- I've said recently from this pulpit how important it is for us to pay attention to what parables are and aren't – how parables are stories meant to help us think about a question
- Said it around 7 days ago, in fact
- And the parable we hear this morning is no exception – it's a story told to make us think more deeply about a specific theological question: "In whom do we trust?"
- On the surface, it seems like a very easy question – especially here, in Church – the setting gives a clue to the answer we think might be expected
- And if that weren't enough, we've even gone ahead and printed a statement about it on our money: "In God we trust"
- But is that statement, that credo, entirely true?
- How many of us, during the reading of the Gospel, heard about the prayer of this Pharisee, saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people..." – how many of us have heard or read that passage and thought to ourselves, "God, I thank you that I am not like the Pharisee in this story..." \*\*
- You see the problem there, I'm sure – the infinite regress of self-righteousness
- The point of this story is to get us thinking – to catch us in that pattern of self-righteousness
- To catch us and call us out in those moments of thinking we're better than others
- To highlight how so often our default is to trust not in God, but in ourselves
- We learn that, I think, from an extremely young age
- 
- My son Ezra just turned two back in May, and Loren is fond of saying that Ezra is embracing two with every fiber of his being
- He is testing boundaries and pushing limits, and one of the most common phrases that can be heard around our house is a very insistent: "No, I want to do it"
- He's at an entirely normal stage in psychosocial development, that everyone goes through, where we are all taught a relatively important lesson for life in the world: I can count on myself
- And that lesson sticks with us
- We don't always put it in Ezra's stark terms – don't always shout "No, I want to do it" – but we learn extremely early on and are reticent to unlearn the lesson that we can count most fully on ourselves

- The Pharisee in our parable definitely learned this lesson – he sees everyone else in the world and gives thanks to God that he isn't like other people – that he has earned a higher degree of righteousness than everyone else he sees
- And the incredible thing about it is that, if you look at the evidence, he isn't even entirely wrong: he fasts twice a week **and** he tithes on his income?
- Guessing he's got all of us beat on at least one of those counts
- The problem isn't really that he isn't a righteous man because he **is** in fact a righteous man
- The problem is that he's self-righteous – that the foundation of his righteousness, to him, is his own doing
- That his trust is placed firmly in himself
- 
- The tax collector, by comparison, we don't know a great deal about, at least not by his own account
- But we know what tax collectors were like at the time – they were people who worked more or less on commission, who were likely to get rich by gouging their neighbors for every cent – and possibly even more – that they owed the government
- They profited off of the economic oppression of other people
- They were many things, but righteous was almost assuredly not one of them
- The only difference with our particular tax collector is that he appeared to know it
- His prayer is a simple one: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"
- He prays this simple prayer to God, knowing his faults – confessing his sins
- And in so doing, trusts in God, rather than himself
- 
- There are two prayers this passage makes me think of – two prayers that I deeply adore and I think strike at the heart of what it means to trust in God rather than in ourselves
- The first is one of the oldest and most practiced prayers in all of Christendom, especially in the Eastern Church – and it's just one simple phrase: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
- It's called the Jesus Prayer, and Eastern Orthodox monastics or anyone else in that tradition seeking to take seriously the exhortation to pray without ceasing usually starts by repeating that prayer that is at least partly inspired by this tax collector, over and over again, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
- The second is one that's a little more familiar to our Anglican tradition – though

unfortunately it's confined to Rite I, and even only optional there

- It's part of an historic prayer called the Prayer of Humble Access – and in Rite I it's the last prayer we pray before being invited to the table and sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ
- And in it we pray these words: “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.”
- As we approach the table, we affirm in this prayer that we're trusting not in ourselves, but in God
- 
- There's an important lesson in our readings today – about who we can (and should) trust
- The first is that when we are honest with ourselves, we find, like the tax collector, that we are all sinners
- That's an important point, but not so that we beat ourselves up about it – there's a certain freedom in admitting that we are every bit as fallen, as broken, as imperfect, as everyone else is
- We don't need to beat ourselves up or rake ourselves over the coals about it – but it is important to be honest about it so that we realize – our trust should **not** be in ourselves
- Because we are broken – because we are imperfect – because we can't even do those things that we set out to do, for ourselves or for other people – just one visit to the graveyard of our new year's resolutions is enough to prove that beyond any reasonable doubt
- We are very good at letting ourselves and each other down
- And it's because of this that we come to realize, that we shouldn't trust in ourselves – shouldn't trust in our own righteousness
- Shouldn't look around and thank God that we are not like other people, because deep down we really are
- But should instead look around and thank God that, like other people, we too are extended God's grace
- Look around and trust not in ourselves but in God's manifold and great mercies
- Look around at our lives, at our mistakes, and simply pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
- And know, thank God, that we can trust that that mercy extends even to sinners like us