

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray,
one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector.”

I know I say this a lot,
but this might be my favorite parable.

Really!

It's great because it shows the real power of teaching by parable.

It's a simple, yet memorable story.

It works at face value,

but it also works with a great “gotcha” factor that sticks with you.

Before we get started though,

we need to do a bit of quick “unlearning”

if we are going to let this parable work to it's full effect.

Because we have read a lot of the Bible,

and hear Jesus' parables all the time,

we know that Jesus does not think highly of the Pharisees.

He often uses them as examples of misbehavior.

But he uses them for a reason.

They are an easy target

for someone with the ironic sense of humor that Jesus uses so well.

Pharisees are actually the fine upstanding citizens of the time,

at least in the eyes of most of the people.

And to be fair,

this Pharisee is a thoroughly decent,

generous, committed believer.

The kind of man most churches

would be thrilled to death to have filling their pews.

The kind of person that churches indeed depend on.

The Pharisee of this parable really only has one problem.

We'll get to that in a bit.

And let's not forget the tax collector,

in some translations called the publican.

It's all too easy to try and nice him up a bit,

you know, think of him like Robin Hood, the noble thief.

But that too would not be faithful to the times.

In first century Jerusalem,

a tax collector is at best a rogue and a scoundrel

and at worst a outright thief and extortionist.

He was hated by the people as a turncoat,

someone who had sold out to the occupying Roman Army.

He is the kind of man it is dangerous to be around;

the kind of man churches need to protect themselves from.

As we approach this parable

we need to remember that these characters are real people,

and if we make them into cartoons,

inadvertently reversing their real positions,

we take all the power from this story.

It is important that we read carefully.

Remember that this parable is not a story about right and wrong,

but a story about where to put your trust,

in yourself and your actions,

or in God and God's grace.

Being Americans from the good old U S of A,

where rugged individualism

is both our birthright and our particularly problematic cross to bear,

it is a parable that we can't hear often enough.

Every time I hear this parable

I think back on a time when I lived it,
so to speak.

You see, I used to know the publican.

Thankfully, I wasn't the Pharisee in the story, not really.

Luckily, I had already met Jesus.

Back when I was a pharmacist,

one of my hero's was a man I served with
on the Vestry at St. Mary's Church in Park Ridge.

His name was Lee Gleason,

and sadly he died about eighteen years ago.

He was a big mucky-muck in Leo Burnett,

one of the biggest advertising firms in Chicago, and indeed, the country,
(He had the Kellogg Cereal Account)

so you might think that he would be the Pharisee in the story,
but you would be wrong.

One of the things that haunted him,

as he used to joke,

was that he felt like he worked for the "great Satan."

Lee worked in advertising

and he was very good at what he did,

but he struggled with the problem

that he thought he was trying to get people to buy stuff they didn't really need,
by convincing them that they needed it.

He wasn't convinced that advertising was an altogether ethical undertaking.

And so, he prayed.

He prayed for forgiveness,

but even more he prayed for a way to use his gifts in other ways.

And out of that prayer came a project

to make a series of drawings to be used for bulletin covers at the church.

A little thing really.

Each drawing would be based on the readings in the lectionary for that week,
and so they came to the church week after week for three whole years.

I remember waiting each week to see what he would capture;
how he would turn scripture into art.

I must say, that God richly rewarded his prayer,
for they were masterpieces, at least to me.

Though they were only simple pen and ink drawings,
they were a wonder to see.

They had a beauty that went beyond mere art.

They were one mans redemption.

“I tell you, this man went down to his home justified...

for all who exalt themselves will be humbled,

but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Whenever I hear this parable and think of the tax collector,

I think of my friend Lee and his prayers,

and how God answered his prayers as God answers all our prayers...

as will be best for us.

And now the “gotcha.”

The “gotcha” is such a classic of Jesus’ ministry

that I am sure he put it in there on purpose.

And that he meant it for us;

Which is to say, for all of the us’– past, present, and future.

The “gotcha” is, I think, most clearly illustrated by the following joke:

A Sunday school teacher stood before the class

and read the following bit of scripture.

Jesus said: Two men went up to the temple to pray,

a Pharisee (a member of a Jewish group

that observed personal religious duties with great strictness)
and a publican (i. e., a tax-collector for the Romans,
and therefore an outcast).

The Pharisee prayed:

“God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men—
extortioners, unjust, adulterers, publicans like that fellow over there.
I fast and tithe regularly.”

The publican prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

I tell you, it was the publican, not the Pharisee,
who was brought into a right relationship with God.

The Sunday school teacher finished the story, paused, and then continued earnestly:

“And now, children, let us all pray
and thank God that we are not like that Pharisee.”

When you have finished chuckling,

ask yourself whether or not you were,
just for a moment,
taking comfort in the thought
that you are not like that Sunday school teacher.

“How could she do that?

I’d never do anything like that!”
And suddenly you find yourself inside the parable,
wearing the Sunday school teachers shoes,
or the Pharisee’s robe.

Or both!

See what I mean about the “gotcha?”

It’s so hard to escape.

It can so easily become an endless loop.

Even though the Gospel lesson starts out by saying,

“Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves,

that they were righteous
and regarded others with contempt,”
still we fall into the trap.

That’s because the line between righteousness and self-righteousness
is so very fine indeed.

And porous.

Thankfully our help lies not along that axis,
but in the boundless love and mercy of God.

It is hard for us to remember

that our salvation lies not in anything that we do—
not even in the fact that we know our theology well enough
not to trust in our own works,
or even in our refusal to trust in our own works,
or even.... yup, there I go again.

There we always go again.

Living in a world where we put so much worth in doing things,
it’s hard to remember that God loves us for who we are
and not what we do.

It may even be impossible;
for us.

Lucky for us

our salvation hangs on God’s love
whether we remember or not.

Thanks be to God,

who delivers us from getting caught up in ourselves,
and going round and round in those endless loops.

Thanks be to God,

who loves us all whether Pharisee or tax collector,
or anything else in between. Amen.