



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 20 Proper 25 (C)

Sinners

[RCL] Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

When Jesus walked this earth, he was known not only for the miracles he performed but also for the parables he told. The genius of Jesus' parables is the way they shock and surprise the audience by subverting conventional wisdom and expectations. One such parable is that of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

A pharisee and a tax collector went to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee proceeded to thank God that he was unlike other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, and sinners like the disgraceful tax collector. He went on to praise himself for fasting twice a week and giving his tithes. The tax collector, on the other hand, bowed his head, beat his breast, and prayed: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus said, between the Pharisee and the tax collector, it was the latter that was made right with God.

How can Jesus say this? Everybody knows that Pharisees were extremely religious leaders. They represent the best of the Jews: morally upright, knowing the Law, observing the rituals and everything the religion requires, and teaching the Law so that everyone could be as righteous as him. The tax collector was the vilest and lowest human being in the eyes of many; they were not only dishonest and greedy extortioners but worse, they were reviled as traitors for working for the Jewish enemy, the Romans.

To appreciate the shock of this story, a contemporary retelling may be helpful to reposition ourselves to the way people would have heard it in the time of Jesus. Such retelling can go like this: A model Christian and a criminal went to church to pray. Without hesitation, the Christian entered the church, dipped his fingers in the stoup that holds the holy water, made the sign of the cross, genuflected, and headed straight to his favorite pew in front of the altar. It is obvious that he knew what he was doing and was familiar with the place. Looking up, he lifted up his hands and prayed, "Thank you, God, for blessing me and making me unlike those corrupt and miserable sinners who cannot tell good from evil, who live their lives separate from you, who do not come to church, like that criminal over there. I read the Bible daily, I never miss church, I pray for the less fortunate, I fast twice a week, I advocate for justice and human rights, I support Episcopal Relief & Development and other non-profit organizations that are helping the poor, and I give my tithes."

The criminal, on the other hand, hesitated, unsure whether to kneel or make the sign of the cross first. He had not been to church in a long while. His only claim to fame was his notoriety as an incorrigible crook who stole money from people to support his drug addiction, lured young people to join his gang, and was

in and out of prison. Full of shame and with head bowed, he whispered this prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

According to Jesus, it was the tax collector – in this case, the criminal – that was put right with God. As he said, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The message seems simple and pretty straightforward. As Luke says, Jesus told this parable “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

As we listen to this parable, there might be a strong temptation to align ourselves with the tax collector or criminal who was made right by humbling himself to God. We like to think of ourselves as humble people. It is even possible that some of us think of ourselves as better than the tax collector because, unlike him, we are good people *and* humble.

It is also possible to hear this parable cynically and entrench ourselves in our sinful ways, assuming that it is okay to live a life like that of the tax collector and criminal, since all we need to do is humble ourselves and ask for mercy, thus being declared right with God.

Neither of these is Jesus’ intent in telling the parable. For us to hear the message, we need to position ourselves in the situation of the Pharisee or the model Christian who went to church and said his self-congratulatory prayer as he looked down on the tax collector or criminal.

If we are hearing this from the standpoint of the Pharisee and model Christian, or, as Jesus said, as people “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt,” this parable is an invitation to look deep inside us, do the necessary work of introspection, to move past the outward good works that we do, in order to see our sinfulness - and then repent. The truth is, it can be easy to hide our broken selves under the many beautiful things that we do. It is possible that we can be doing all the right things, like being active in the community and the church, praying, doing justice, defending peace and the integrity of creation, helping the poor, the immigrants, and the youth, and advocating for the rights of those most in danger of losing them. The good works that we do sometimes serve as a smokescreen to make us look good and busy and feel great about ourselves!

Additionally, heard from the perspective of the Pharisee, this parable is an indictment of our self-satisfaction, self-righteousness, and our pharisaic tendency to extol ourselves by tearing down others.

The tragedy of the Pharisee and the model Christian, even if they are such great human beings, is that they went in and out of the church without repentance and change of heart.

Repentance is an important inner work in response to the message of Christ. In Luke 5:32, Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners for repentance.” Unfortunately, in many churches, confession and absolution have been relegated only to special seasons like Lent and Advent. We need to make it plain that confession of sins and repentance are integral parts of our discipleship and make more conscious efforts to create a space for this to happen in our services.

Author and founder of the webzine *Journey with Jesus* Daniel Clendenin tells of his experience when he visited St. Aldate’s Church. As he walked in, he was greeted by an usher who handed him the bulletin for that Sunday with these words: “We welcome all sinners.” It was a strange greeting, even offensive. How

did the usher know? But it was actually the honest truth, as Mr. Clendenin readily agreed. He later wrote that those words were “the words that [he] needed to hear right then and there.”

We need to hear this parable for the good news that it is. It is an invitation to come clean, be honest, tell the truth, be humble, surrender to God, acknowledge our sins, and repent. The truth is, none of our accomplishments that normally get us the good graces of people work with God. None. Nada. Nothing. Only true repentance in response to the grace of God can give us the deep cleansing and healing that we need. Only when we acknowledge our lostness can we be found.

We are all recovering sinners, whether we view ourselves as the Pharisee, the tax collector, or both. We need to repent, trust in the goodness of God, and surrender by confessing our sins. In this work of confession, repentance, and transformation, the following 12 steps of recovery from Alcoholics Anonymous can be helpful. Merely substitute “sin” for “alcohol”:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

*This sermon was written by **the Ven. Irene Egmalis-Maliaman**, of the Episcopal Church of St. John the Divine in Tamuning, Guam.*