

Sermon for 24 October 2010
21 Pentecost; Proper 24, Year C

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

To get the full impact of the parable Jesus tells in this morning's Gospel, I think we need to step back and examine the preconceptions with which we enter into the story today. "Two men went up into the temple to pray," Jesus says, "one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." Even if we hadn't heard this particular parable a hundred times, we'd know who's supposed to be the good guy and the bad guy, right? Well, no. We've grown up in the Church with a pretty strong sense that Pharisees were Jesus enemies, the "bad guys" as it were. They have come to be regarded as a lot of hypocrites.

But, Jesus never denounced the Pharisees as a whole, only certain individuals of their number. To his audience, the Pharisees were well-respected

religious leaders, and I think they're due for a bit of rehabilitation in our own day. Yes, they were a bit rigid. We'd not want to go out on the town with a bunch of Pharisees on Friday night. But, if nothing else, they were on the whole a faithful group of religious Jews who spent a great deal of energy in their quest to abide by God's law. On the whole, the Pharisees could have been seen to be the good guys.

And then there's the tax collector. We know that tax collectors were not well-loved by Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, but I don't think we know the extent of their unrighteousness. To us, taxes are a necessary evil, and while a severe audit might cause us to demonize the tax man, we know that the men and women who work for the Internal Revenue Service are not only "just doing their job", but are doing a job which is essential for realizing the common good.

But tax collectors in Jesus' day were not just officious bureaucrats executing a necessary task. They were thugs. You see, the Roman Empire would have told these tax collectors how much they expected from each taxpayer, and then it was up to the individual tax collector to determine by how much he would overcharge each of them. His salary would be exactly how much extra money he could collect through extortion. The Empire understood that this was the case, and would encourage the tax collector to wring as much out of his already overtaxed compatriots as he could.

So, Jesus sets his audience up to expect the opposite of what he gives them in the parable. We have a good, faithful person and a thug, and justice would hold that the Pharisee—whom we can assume was being honest about fasting and tithing and so forth—would go home from the temple justified, and that the tax collector would get his just deserts. Perhaps the Pharisee was being a bit

haughty, but he had earned the right to be proud of his faithful obedience.

Jesus turns the expectation of his audience on its ear, and we can assume that they didn't like what they heard. We wouldn't if we were in their shoes. Perhaps it's still hard for us to see how disconcerting this teaching can be, so permit me to update the parable a bit.

When I lived in the U.K. several years ago, I was introduced to a peculiar type of costume party the English like to throw. It's called a "vicar and tart" party. The men would all go to the party dressed like priests, and the women would go dressed... well, in not the most appropriate attire. I never went to such a party, but it's fascinating how the very idea of this confluence of two apparently divergent streams of culture was funny enough to get people to dress themselves in ridiculous costumes to go to the party.

Now what if a vicar and a tart found themselves praying in Saint Paul's? The vicar might thank God for not having fallen into a life of spiritual depredation, like that trollopy slattern in the back pew. He prays the daily office faithfully, he visits the sick of his parish, he turns in his pledge card every year. And the woman in the back prays for mercy, but perhaps she's just going to go back to her old habits tonight. Who goes back to his or her house justified? What if the vicar continues to be faithful and the tart continues to trespass, and they keep coming back to church every week and praying the same prayers; who's justified then? We want to say it's the vicar, because he's behaving correctly. But Jesus says it's the tart.

It all gets back to that same old struggle we have in accepting how God works. As much as we cognitively affirm the fact that our salvation is not our own doing, that our justification is a gift from God rather than a reward for our goodness, we

never seem to believe it deep down. And, sometimes, our *religion* can have the opposite effect of what religion ought to have. It can convince us that we are righteous people set up to reap the rewards of our righteousness, rather than sinners in need of saving. It is paradoxical, but it seems that the best among us can have the hardest time being justified. The tax collector and the tart knew they were sinners, and could say the one prayer that really meant anything besides "look at me, ain't I grand." They could say that prayer which needs to be on the tip of our tongues, too: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" When we can get beyond being impressed with how good we are, we can say that, and we can remember how merciful God has always been to us, who needed Him whether we knew it or not.

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