

20 Pentecost, Proper 25, Yr. C

October 27, 2019

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

When my grandsons were much younger, there was an occasion when I was babysitting. They suggested we go out and play a game called “around the world.” It’s a basketball game, I discovered. Each person takes a turn trying for a basket. If you get one, you rotate positions and get another turn. You need to know that I played a little basketball in Jr. High and I was horrible. However, on this day, I seemingly couldn’t miss – we were all amazed as I got basket after basket. I was telling my daughter about it over dinner and Joe, the older, looked at me and said, “Gram, you know that no one likes a braggart.” So I hastened to explain that I wasn’t bragging, but was talking about a minor miracle.

But that statement about nobody liking a braggart could apply to this morning’s Gospel. Here we have the Pharisee bragging – telling God how lucky God was to have the Pharisee on his team, with his fasting and his tithing and his general goodness. And he really does appear to be an upright fellow. Because the Pharisees are so often seen as anal-retentive legalists, we forget that while they were certainly obedient to the law in every detail, they were obedient for a reason – because they were trying to create a world into which the Messiah would finally come. And, in the period during and after the Exile, it was the Pharisees who held Jewish society together, helping it retain its identity through law and ritual and synagogue worship far from the Temple. So, he truly is upright – there are just a couple of problems. The first is that he thinks it’s all his own doing, that he’s a winner in the

game of life and in the longer term game of justifying himself in the eyes of God. And furthermore, he knows who the losers are – he can identify them and safely despise them. In fact, he’s thinking, just look, there’s one right over there – that miserable tax collector. And he not only identified him, he coupled that identification with contempt.

The tax collector gets it right as well. He’s a sinner. Tax collectors were hated in the Jewish world, helping the Roman oppressor bleed the Jewish population. This fellow’s prayer is vastly different. He’s not comparing himself with anyone else. He recognizes his sin and knows that he’s in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness. He knows the truth of his condition, but whether he recognizes it or not, it’s actually the truth of the HUMAN condition – the truth that ALL of us fall short and that all of us are completely dependent on God, and on God’s grace for righteousness and justification.

Go back for a minute to the beginning of the reading. Jesus is telling this parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” You’ll remember that righteousness has to do with being in right relationship with God and everyone else. But before you can do that, you need to figure out the whole scheme of things, including your own position in that scheme.

And this is where humility comes in. Not false humility which denies that we have any gifts at all, but humility that recognizes the truth of our lives: both our gifts and our failings. If someone were to tell us we are humble, how would we hear that? It’s said that someone once said to Winston Churchill that one of his opponents was humble and Churchill replied by saying, “Ah, yes,

he has a lot to be humble about.” Or how about the story about Mohammed Ali traveling on a plane. He didn’t have his seat belt on and when the flight attendant asked him to buckle his seatbelt, he said, “Superman don’t need no seatbelt.” The flight attendant wasn’t fazed and responded with, “Superman don’t need no airplane either.” He buckled up.

So on the one hand, the temptation to emphasize our gifts, on the other, the temptation to denigrate them. Humility requires that we do neither, but that we’re clear eyed about both – the gifts and the failings. Thomas Merton once said that humility is about recognizing precisely the person you actually are in the presence of God. In that regard, it’s been said that Moses was more humble than any other person on earth – and maybe that was because he actually found himself in the presence of God. There’s another thing to note about the parable – the Pharisee is comparing: thank God I’m not like THAT fellow. And we’re tempted to do the same, I think. Well, I may have my faults, BUT...I’m not as bad as X. But the comparison that we should be making is the comparison with God, with Jesus, and not with anyone else. And, of course, it’s not that God doesn’t already know exactly who we are. Think of the Collect of Purity with which we start each Eucharist – to you all hearts are open, all desires know and from you no secrets are hid. God knows what’s going on and who we are; we’re the ones who are apt to get confused. But the bottom line, the most basic truth is that God knows us and loves us. We’re God’s children - totally and unconditionally loved – ALL of us. We don’t have to earn that love, or prove our worth. We only have to accept it. Sinners, yes, but forgiven sinners.

Understanding and accepting that is hard to do. It's hard, I think, because it goes against pretty much all our experience in this world. Most, if not all, of us picked up the notion that we had to earn our parents' love, we needed to get good grades in school, to earn our way in the world, to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps. And when we are dealing with the skills that we use in this world, we really do need to develop our skills and to become competent. And often that means really hard work – so when we think of all we have and all we have made of our lives we easily remember the hard work but we sometimes forget that without the initial gifts of God – life itself, eyes to see and hands to touch, a mind to shape ideas, a heart to love, parents and teachers to encourage and support us – it would never have happened. None of us is self-made. Someone once said that our belly-buttons are ontological reminders that there is no such thing as a self-made person – all of us have had to rely on others in order to live.

In our world of endless competition and comparison and self-promotion, it's hard to remember that. I think we've all heard Garrison Keilor's lead-in when he talks about Lake Woebegon as that place where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking and all the children are above average. There's that need to excel; to be on top. And that need is at least one of the things that tempts us to denigrate others, like the Pharisee. We maybe do it a bit differently: thank God, I'm not like... (fill in the blank.) And I think I'm not the only one who, when reading this parable, find myself thinking, THANK GOD I'M NOT LIKE THAT PHARISEE... hmmm.

Hearing this, you are perhaps thinking that the acceptance and love of God that I'm talking about means that we can just sit back

and coast. That we're home free. But it actually means quite the opposite. And that's what we hear Paul telling Timothy this morning. That acceptance, that amazing grace, frees us and moves us, in gratitude, to use those God-given gifts to work for God's people and God's vision. Paul has done this. He's telling Timothy that he has completely poured himself out; that he's used every gift and every bit of energy he had; he has fought the good fight. He knows that he will receive the "crown of righteousness" but he also knows that he's receiving it, not grabbing it because of his own merits. And he also knows that he's called to be God's presence in the world.

Bishop Matt preached at the convention this weekend. In his sermon, he told the story of an Anglican priest talking with someone in Sudan. When he said he was an Anglican, the Sudanese said, "Ah, the Anglican church – it's like lightning on the horizon that's hope for rain in a season of drought." Convicted Christians, with their vision of the kingdom, bringing that message of Christ are like the hope for rain in a season of drought. I don't think there's any better way of saying it. Amen.