

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran church

Vicar Paul Eldred

October 23, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Finally! Thank you, Jesus!

No, I'm not talking about the Cubs, though that is worthy of celebration in its own right!

I am thankful that Jesus is finally talking in parables that are easy to understand. So often, he talks in those stories that are so hard to really know what he means. Like the one about the mustard seed, or the dishonest manager, or the shrewd servants. Really, a lot of Jesus' parables are pretty confusing. But finally this one seems pretty straightforward, and Jesus even tells us what it's about: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

So there you go: be humble.

We can do that!

Just this morning, we opened our worship service confessing our sins and humbly asking God to forgive them. And we heard from Pastor Jason that God has forgiven all of our sins. Just like the tax collector in today's parable, we're obviously doing it right. We have humbled ourselves and have been exalted. And it's clear we've been exalted, because, we're doing pretty well! We come to church, we welcome all people, we contribute to the life and mission of this congregation. I think we're set. So thank you, Jesus, for this simple parable. And really, thank God that we're not like that Pharisee.

Oh.

Well, maybe this parable isn't as simple as it seems. Maybe we should look a little deeper at what Jesus is saying.

First we have this Pharisee who seems to be doing everything right. He's praying, he fasts, and he tithes ten percent of his income. These are all good things that he is doing and we can't fault him for doing them. (And I would not dare criticize his giving of money during our Growing Together Giving Campaign!) The Pharisee says he's righteous and it's true: he *is* righteous. He seems to be living a blameless life. His mistake, though, is not in what he's doing, but in recognizing God's work in his life. The Pharisee's prayer to God ultimately is a prayer about himself – about what he has done and who he is not. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." *I pray, I*

fast, *I* give. It's all about him. He doesn't see how God has been active in his life and doesn't recognize that God is present in the lives of the people he names: the thieves, rogues, adulterers, and even this tax collector.

The tax collector is another interesting character. His community likely sees him as a collaborator – working with the tyrannical Roman Empire collecting their oppressive taxes while adding some cash on the side to make a comfortable living. He says that he is a sinner and he's right. But what sets this sinner apart is that he recognizes his complete reliance on God's mercy. And this is why Jesus says that the tax collector is justified rather than the Pharisee, as unworthy as he may be: the tax collector understood that he is utterly dependent on God's love and mercy while the Pharisee could only recognize his own actions.

As we prepare to commemorate Reformation Sunday next week, we can recognize the tax collector's reliance on God as a very Lutheran approach. As Luther said in his Small Catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with [God's] gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Luther knew that there was nothing that we could do to earn God's love for us but that we were completely reliant on God's grace. He knew that if we had to do anything to merit God's love and

favor, we would not be able to achieve it – that it is not possible for us to do anything that would put us in a right relationship with God. Instead, Luther preached that God’s love is a free and radical gift given for all people regardless of merit or worthiness.

Ultimately, then, it seems that Jesus is using this parable to shift our focus from what we do and who we are to focus instead on God and God’s love and mercy. Jesus moves the attention from us and our good works or our sinful nature and points us to our need for God. And our God is there to fill our needs. We have a God who loves to welcome the outcast, heal the sick, and love the unworthy. We have a God who showers us with the blessings of life, love, and a community in Christ. Ours is a God that brings new life in the face of death and hope in the presence of despair. And when we cry out, beating our chest saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” our God responds with, “You are my child. I love you and I forgive you.”

And when we are so full of God’s love for us that we cannot keep it to ourselves any longer, we respond to this love through prayer and through worship and through the giving of our treasures – not trying to earn God’s love, but as an outpouring of that love in our lives. When we are filled with God’s love, we cannot help sharing that love with our neighbors around us, fellow children of God. And we stand in awe and thanksgiving of a God that

pulls all people – the Pharisees and the tax collectors, the righteous and the sinners – into an unimaginable embrace of joy and mercy and love that will never end.

Amen.