

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Year C
October 23, 2016**

Luke 18:9 –14

“You want iced tea, hon?” The server always asked that and then brought iced tea for everyone no matter what they ordered – sweet tea, of course. But she was nice and the food was great so it didn’t matter. Every time I left the restaurant she asked me to remember her in prayer.

One day she asked me to pray extra hard. I said I would and then got ready to leave with the three other priests that had joined me that day. “No, I mean right now, here. And make it a good one. I need to make some money from my yard sale or I won’t make rent this month.” That was a new one but was very important to her. It was also a good reminder to offer *everything* to God, the big and small things. She and all four priests stood and held hands around the table, as she instructed, as I came up with the best prayer for a successful yard sale one could muster. There isn’t one in the Prayer Book, by the way. It was remarkable how free and unembarrassed she was. She was there to pray and didn’t care what anyone else thought about it.

Afterwards she said, “we should all pray for what we really need. *No one* prays to ask God to make them unhappy, short, fat, bald, or broke.” I had never thought of it before but that is probably true. No one says Lord, help me to fail this test or lose this job or help me to be a slightly worse person today. Every day, she said, I ask Jesus to remind me he loves me and then decide I’m going to be happy and generous and slightly better and ask God to help make it so.” She knew exactly who she was and wasn’t. She was humble in the fullest sense of the word.

That experience was a reminder to pray for and live with humility – to live on our knees before God all the time. That is the subject of today’s gospel reading from Luke. Luke tells us this parable was addressed to those who thought they were better than others and regarded other people with contempt. It is a practical lesson for those who follow Jesus as disciples.

Parables often have two, contrasting characters to illustrate a point, the Pharisee and the tax collector in this case. Parables also usually have an unexpected twist; this parable has two. Pharisees have a bad reputation in the gospels but, in their day, the Pharisee was the epitome of a good and generous person. Everyone assumed he would be the hero.

He went to the Temple to pray. He stood by himself and looked up to heaven. His prayer, *slightly modernized*, went like this. Thank you God, that I am not like *other* people – *those* people. I fast and pray and have all the outward signs of success. I give away 10% of my income to help those poor wretches. I go to the right places with all the right people. I feel pretty good about myself and even on a bad day, I’m better than they are.

The story contrasts the Pharisee with a second character, a tax collector. Every good Jew who heard this story would recognize immediately the tax collector was one of the *worst* types of people. Everyone assumed he was the villain of the story. They took money to give to Rome, a foreign army in the holy land, and skimmed off the top for their own gain. He turned his back on his own people and *used* them. He would not have been allowed in the Temple to pray, the symbol of God’s presence. The tax collector was the epitome of a bad and ungenerous person.

The tax collector also went to the Temple to pray. Notice what he did. He stood far off. He didn't even look up to see who was watching or how his prayers compared to everyone else's. He simply talked to God honestly and freely much like the server who always called me "hon." He prayed – "God, be merciful to me." That prayer, God be merciful to me, is always answered.

The first unexpected twist to the story is that Jesus says it was the *tax collector*, **not** the Pharisee, who went home justified that day. This parable is **not** saying not to be proud of our accomplishments. It is fine to be proud of hard work and effort. The Pharisee's prayer, fasting, and charitable giving can all be good things when offered to God. He just used them to make himself look better in the eyes of others. He wasn't interested in mercy for anyone but himself.

The parable **is** saying our ultimate worth is not from what we do – priest or president or waitress. Nor does our value as a person come from comparing ourselves to others. For the Pharisee, it was a competition to show off his goodness rather than actually help anyone.

We **do** have a tendency to compare ourselves to others. How **we** are – is usually seen as how we are doing in relation to other people. Not how am I – but how am I compared to the coworker or the kid at school or the Pharisee or those on the other side of the political divide. Jesus is saying that approach will get us nowhere. It did not work for the Pharisee and it will not work for us. What the tax collector did, and what we are called to do, is to live with honesty and humility.

Usually when we think of humility, it means we are supposed to be self-deprecating, self-effacing. – I'm not worthy. I'm not good enough. That is a type of false pride. Humility comes from the root meaning "of the earth, dirt, or soil." It means to be rooted, grounded – to be connected to God – to know who you truly are. Humility is not to think too highly **or** too lowly of oneself. To be humble is to have a proper estimation of oneself before God and our neighbors. It is to be mindful of who you are and who you are not.

That is the second unexpected twist to the parable. We can be very quick to judge the Pharisee. At least I'm not as bad as he is. To do so is to fall prey to the **same** mistake he made. He compared himself to others to feel better about himself. That, too, gets us nowhere good.

To live with humility – to be rooted in God – allows us not to be concerned with what others think of us or how **we** are doing in comparison to them. That is between you and God. We *never* fully know what our neighbors are struggling with. They have their crosses to bear and we have our own. To live as grounded people, we find our ultimate worth in belonging to God.

The tax collector admitted life was beyond his control. He was done trying to live up to someone else's expectations. He was exhausted from too much of everything but the right thing. Was a tax collector *all* he was or could he imagine something more? In his prayer, God be merciful to me, he realized who he could be – rooted in God.

This parable calls us to ask the question of ourselves – Who am I? What is the root of my identity? Is it defined by your family, job, gender, ethnic group, age, friends, hobbies, politics or wealth? Is that all there is or can you imagine something more? Humility is to be rooted in who you truly are. Our grounded identity is to know that "it is not about what you **do** or even how you **live** – but **primarily** it is about how God loves you." [Last line quote from the Rev. Richard Watson, *All Saints Margaret Street Parish Paper in October, 2010*]