

Today’s Gospel lesson consisted of a story Jesus told to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others,” Luke tells us... So should we have covered our ears?? Do we even need to hear this? *Perhaps we do – yesterday at our sale, there were folks of another ethnicity in attendance, and afterwards, when one of our folks couldn’t find the ring she had dropped off her finger, someone said, “Probably those people took it.” It’s too easy for us to fall into regarding someone different from us as worse than us... At least we’re not as bad as THEY are....*

In Jesus’ day, we need to remember that there was no lower scumbag than the tax collector. He was a Jew who worked for the occupying Romans, but even more, he worked hard to squeeze more money out of his fellow citizens than Rome required, for that was how he lived. So if the tax collector came to your door and your wife was sick and your children needed glasses and you yourself had hurt your back a couple of weeks ago, you would find no mercy when you begged him to let you have another couple of weeks to pay your taxes. No, pay now or go to debtors’ prison, that’s what the tax collector would, and could, demand. No mercy. No leniency. It was not surprising that everybody hated him.

But one tax collector went to worship that day, and his miserable soul cried out to God for mercy. And to the surprise of all who heard Jesus, back then and perhaps right now, God had mercy on this rotten guy; the one who had not shown mercy on others was given grace and mercy.

“God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds... Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.” (Psalm 147:3, 5)

And then there was the Pharisee. Now we may know the story too well to let it speak to us, because when we hear “Pharisee,” we think of the religious big-wigs who wanted to get rid of Jesus. But before that, the Pharisees were men who were very serious about their religion. They tried to follow the Jewish law to the T, and they were careful to do nice things for people, since they had read in the Jewish scriptures that God wanted God’s people to take care of the powerless and uphold justice for the poor. So this Pharisee was spending his life following the rules, trying to be good, doing his best to make sure that his life was pleasing to God.

As he went to worship that day, he happened to notice that miserable tax collector. And so he went into what Jews consider to be the highest form of prayer: thanksgiving. “Thank you, God, that I am not like that man! Thank you that I have done GOOD things with MY life!” He was telling the truth....

So Jesus’ hearers were jolted when the tax collector, not the “good-guy” Pharisee, was shown to be justified by God. And every time we read this parable and think to ourselves, “I am glad I am not as smug as that Pharisee,” we step right into Jesus’ trap, just as his original hearers did!

Jesus wanted us to know that we are not going to impress God with our holiness, we are not going to impress God with our giving, we are not going to impress God with what we have accomplished; we are not even going to impress God with the fact that we may have been better than some other people.

God does not ask us to come into worship time with a report of our own merits. God invites us to come more fully into a *relationship*-- one we have not earned by working hard, or won because we are lucky, or received for any reason other than that God has called us into the relationship. Our best response is gratitude and humility.

Something happened between the tax collector and God during the time of worship. The tax collector was justified in God's sight because he allowed himself to come into relationship with God during the prayer. The Pharisee, on the other hand, had everything all sewed up, so that there wasn't any room - or really any need - for God. The Pharisee prayed the best prayer possible, thanking God not for what God was, or for what God had done, but because he himself was so wonderful. He had a long list of his own goodnesses, and the fact that he went several steps further than just the basic "good church member" requirements. He fasted twice a week in addition to tithing. He was upright. God was lucky to have such a man on God's team. So the prayer merely puffed the man up some more in his own eyes.

Our world is full of problems. Any one of us could fill a page with what is wrong; everything from greed to pollution to divorce to overpopulation to starvation to cancer to drunk driving to lousy workmanship to drug abuse to television to ineffective schools to war to the economy to the way our politicians have apparently been more interested in power plays than in what is good for us or the country.

But underneath all these problems there is a very basic one in our society: individuals who assume that we are doing "all right" in the sight of God. Large numbers of people who claim to be Christian today, who have been baptized, confirmed, born again or whatever term indicates good standing as a member of a congregation, see ourselves as good, decent people.

This brings to mind a familiar illustration: A far-eastern soldier once approached a great Teacher. "I have mastered all of the martial arts," he said calmly. "I have risen to the highest rank possible for a man of my training. I now wish to learn about God. Can you help me?" The teacher smiled and invited the man to sit at the table. "Let us have a cup of tea," he said, before we talk further." After the soldier sat, the Teacher began to pour tea into the man's cup. He filled the cup and kept pouring until the tea was running over the table onto the floor. The soldier watched dumfounded until he could no longer be silent. "Stop! It is full! The cup will hold no more tea!" Placing the teapot on the table, the Teacher addressed the soldier, "In the same way, you are so full of yourself that there is no room for God. It is not possible for you to learn until you empty yourself." (pause)

Somebody once suggested that we Christians get just enough religion to be “vaccinated” against having a real, life-changing relationship with God! “Vaccinated” this way, we too often end up quite complacent about the way we use our lives, about the way we run our churches, and about the way we view our worship.

Over the years I have heard folks say what they want in church worship services. Not much longer than an hour. Nothing upsetting or disruptive. Not too many hymns, but “good” ones. And the sermon should be entertaining, as short as possible, and provide things to think about. Stories are good...

I cannot remember having been told: “Pastor, make us so uncomfortable in worship that our lives will be changed. Call us to true repentance of our sins. Don’t let us come back until we are totally ready to let GOD be in the driver’s seat of our lives.”

Is there any possibility that God might be wanting to talk with us about what we are doing with our lives? Is God pleased with how we have spent our week and even with how we are spending this time of worship? Does what we do and read about and sing here make any real difference in what we do afterwards? Or are we so full of ourselves when we come in that we are just the same when we leave?

The Bible shows us God’s heart, what God hoped and hopes for when it comes to God’s people. God created humanity to be in relation with God, but humanity has continually turned our back on God and refused to love each other. God has persistently asked - through the prophets and through Jesus - for us to see how we have failed to be an obedient people, but we continue to go our own ways, addicted to our own agendas. Even so, God has not given up on us; God acts to get our attention so that God can show us the way to LIFE.

So here we are today, October 27, 2013. We are worshiping God. We are here, so we’ve brought our physical bodies in. We have joined in the affirmation of faith and prayers and have heard some scriptures and sung a hymn. But deep inside, have we been “touchable” for God? Have we really looked at our lives and said, “I need you, God”? Have we asked God, “What do you need or want from me?”

Have we let Psalm 147 be a word of hope for us? “God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds... Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.”

If the sermon is good and the choir’s music pleases us, great. But if God gets a grip on us, that’s what it’s really about!! We stand in the need of prayer.... We are the ones who need mercy and forgiveness and probably a good-sized heavenly kick in the butt.... We’ve been told very plainly what God wants of us: Love the Lord your God with all that you are (your mind,

your money, your time), and love your neighbor – in the world, at your place of work, in your school, on your street, in your home – as much as you do yourself.

There's an old spiritual that offers a powerful message:

It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer....not somebody else, but me. I am the one who needs prayer. I am the one who gives more time to my cell phone and the stock market and the newspaper than I do to my Lord.... I am the one who needs to realign my priorities... God knows. We do not. We struggle to know our own hearts; we cannot really know the heart of any other person. Therefore we cannot condemn him or her.

"It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." And so each of us is here, to receive our fill of God's mercy. And we may, because God knows us, who we really are, what we really need, and why we are really here. "God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds... Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure." (Psalm 147)

I close this sermon with a prayer, as one who stands in the need of prayer:

O God, you see us all the way through; you know our angers and our mixed motives and the ways we try to make ourselves look better than we are..... You understand where we have fallen short, and where we feel at the end of our ropes.... You know where we cannot seem to find a way to love or a foothold in life. Help us please, God. We cannot save ourselves. In the name of Jesus Christ, have mercy on each of us, and lead us to really live. Amen.