

August 28, 2022

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Text: Luke 18:9-14; Ephesians 2:1-10

One of the more off-putting elements of our liturgy to those who are unfamiliar with it is the confession of sins. At the beginning of the service, we confess to God that we are sinners: sinners in thought, word, and deed, sinners in what we do and what we fail to do, sinners in our very nature. We even describe ourselves as “poor” and “miserable.”

It’s harsh language, brutally honest. And our human pride hates to hear it, and really hates to say it. We can’t really be that bad, can we? Surely there’s at least a little in every person that is righteous.

The truth of the matter, as God’s word reveals, is that yes, we really are as bad as our confession states. Jesus tells this parable in our Gospel lesson to teach us that we cannot approach God or be justified through anything in ourselves, but only through His mercy.

Jesus makes this point as He contrasts these two men who went up to the temple to pray: a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee goes to the temple to pray – a good thing that God desires. But from the moment the Pharisee begins to speak, his true nature is shown. He might address the prayer to God, but who is it all about? The Pharisee himself! Look at the language: “I thank you... I am not like other men... I fast... I give tithes...” This isn’t a prayer, it’s a bragging session.

The Pharisee’s words are totally grounded in himself. He thinks he can approach God because of how great he is. He doesn’t need any help getting before the throne of God; after all, he’s not like other men. He’s better. Those others – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, that tax collector – they can’t come to God, but he, the Pharisee, certainly can. He doesn’t do such heinous sins.

No, he does good. He fasts twice a week – more than required. He gives a tenth of everything he gets – not just his income, but everything – again, more than required!

Because he is so great, this Pharisee stands off by himself. He’s better than the rabble. To associate with such sinners and hypocrites would only bring him down. No, he’s better off on his own, so that everyone can see him and learn from his example.

Now we can all look at this Pharisee and agree that he’s a self-righteous windbag. He’s so bad it’s almost a caricature! In fact, as we read this, we might be tempted to think, “God, I thank you that I’m not like this Pharisee...” Where have we heard that before?

We could continue: “I’m not like those who skip church or gossip about their neighbors or watch indecent shows. I don’t fast because that’s too Catholic. I give more to church and charity than a lot of others.” Like the Pharisee, we often think that we’re good by ourselves – just “me ‘n Jesus” – and we don’t actually need to gather with all those others in church.

If we’re honest, it’s not too much of a stretch to put ourselves in that Pharisee’s place. Are we really as bad as him? Hang on to that question; we’ll come back to it.

Opposite the Pharisee we have the tax collector. Here, Jesus gives the example of how it is that one rightly approaches the Lord, namely in repentance and faith.

In repentance, this tax collector rightly acknowledges that he is a sinner. He offers no excuses, makes no comparisons with others, casts no blame on God for his situation, nothing. Just the confession that he is a sinner.

And he beats his breast and stands far off, not to draw attention to himself, but to confess with his actions what he has said with his words. There is nothing in him that would entitle him to approach God. His sins have removed him from God's holiness, placing him far off. He dare not even look up to heaven, such is the weight of his guilt.

And yet, by God's gracious working, this tax collector also has been given faith. After all, what else would cause him to come to the temple to pray? As a tax collector, the others would have despised him as a traitor, so he isn't there for popularity's sake.

No, faith led this tax collector to recall those words found throughout Scripture, that God is merciful. And not just recall them to mind, but believe them, trust in them. Despite all his sins and guilt, the tax collector believed that he could still approach God and ask for mercy, because God is merciful.

Whatever was in his past, this man trusted that God still loved him, that as we prayed in our Collect of the Day, God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray and to give more than we either desire or deserve.

Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector makes no mention of his good deeds or merits, but totally throws himself upon the mercy of God. And, through the mercy of God, and the faith given by God, this tax collector returned to his house justified.

The mercy of God is our only hope in being able to approach God as well. If we think we deserve God's favor, or that there is any good in us apart from God's grace, we're no different from the Pharisee.

No, it's nothing in us, but everything in God, in who He is as the merciful, gracious God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. This fact that our salvation is totally dependent on God is what we hear in our Epistle reading, those well-known verses from Ephesians 2: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

It is completely God's mercy and grace and love that cause Him to send His only-begotten Son to die for you. Even though you and I were dead – not sick, dead – in our trespasses and sins, God mercifully gave us the gift of faith in Christ, that we are made alive together with Him.

We pridefully wander around in the dark, convinced that we don't need anyone but ourselves, but God mercifully comes and brings us into the light of His Kingdom, the Church, and gives us countless brothers and sisters to help and encourage us on our way. None of this is our doing. It's all on the mercy of our Lord God.

So then, of the Pharisee and the tax collector, who are you? If you believe in Jesus, then you have been given faith. You've been saved, you've been justified – like the tax collector. But thinking back to the Pharisee, and how easily parts of his prayer fit your life, your thoughts – could you be him?

Now maybe you'd say that you're somewhere in between, that you're on the spectrum between the two, maybe closer to the tax collector's end. Your good outweighs your bad. That's a common thought in our society. And it's one that's wrong, quite frankly.

Note that Jesus only presents the two men; there aren't any people in the middle. And there can't be. You can't partially trust in the mercy of God and partially trust in yourself that you are righteous. You can't sincerely beg God for mercy while sincerely thinking that you aren't like other men. There is no middle ground between being justified and not.

This conundrum confuses a lot of Christians, and it can be used by Satan to lead Christians into either despair or false assurance. But thanks be to God, He has made His truth known to us. As Lutherans, we're blessed that our namesake, Martin Luther, is one of those to whom God revealed this in His holy word.

Luther, and we Lutherans, explain the answer to the question in this way: we who are Christians are both saint and sinner. Not a mix, not somewhere in between. In this life, you are both a poor, miserable sinner and a saint clothed with the righteousness of Christ Himself – at the same time. You are both saint and sinner.

Now, why does this matter? Is this just splitting hairs or getting off into the theological weeds? Not at all! Let me explain.

If it's the case that we're somehow on a spectrum or a balance of some percent righteous and another percent sinful, then we're in trouble! Why? Well, what's the immediate question that would come to mind if such were true? "How good do I have to be?"

Where on the range is the cutoff for heaven? Is it that I need to do more good than bad? (A popular thought.) Is it okay if I just do the good, even if my heart really isn't in it, or if I want to do the good, but fail to actually get it done? What's the standard? What's the requirement?

God gives us this: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Holy. Perfect. That's the standard. Even the tiniest bit of sin cannot be in God's presence. Nowhere on the spectrum is good enough, save the absolute end where God alone dwells. And as we realized as we reflected on the Pharisee's prayer, and as we confessed at the beginning of the service, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

This self-deception is a grave danger of this false idea of balancing sin and righteousness. It's easy for us to think that God can't really mean holy, so if I'm a good person, then that's good enough. We invent our own standard of "good enough," and then surprise, surprise, we do "good enough."

The Second Commandment doesn't apply if I spout God's name without thinking about it. The Third Commandment doesn't apply every Sunday. The Fourth Commandment doesn't apply if I don't like the current President. The Fifth Commandment doesn't apply if someone cuts me off in traffic. And so on and so on.

Then, as time goes on, you'll find this arbitrary bar being lower and lower, relaxing this "good enough" for yourself, until it's hard to tell a Christian from an unbeliever. Pursuing this Lowest Common Denominator Christianity will invariably lead to the loss of faith, as we become numbed to sin.

So how do we fight against sin, without become numb or falling into despair? By realizing the truth that God lays out for us in His word, that we are both sinner and saint. Within each of us is both the Pharisee and the tax collector.

And so when the Holy Spirit shows us our sins, shows us how we might better live as Christians, we don't figure, "It's not that big of a deal" or "other people are worse than I am," but we fight against our sins, we strive to live as God's word says.

We confess that the sinner in us truly is poor and miserable, fallen from our very conception. We seek to drown that Old Adam every day, as Luther wrote in the Catechism. We strive to do those good works which we are created in Christ to do.

And as we fight against this sin, we do so in confidence, because our justification, our salvation, has already been won for us by the blood of Jesus. The Son of God has satisfied the demand of perfection, and in mercy God has credited us with that perfection. In Baptism, we have been born from above, given new hearts that truly love God.

Even when we fall, we need not despair, for we can always cry out for mercy, knowing that our God is merciful and forgives us for Jesus' sake. As you leave this place and go back down to your houses, having been absolved, taught, and fed, you can be certain that you go back down justified by God Himself.

In the name of Jesus, amen.