

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 23, 2022

The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22; Psalm 84:1-6; II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

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God, Be Merciful to Me, a Sinner

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

We have a way, when we relate to each other,
We have a way of managing and curating ourselves for each other.
Now this is no great revelation, I'm sure:
Insofar as there is a social dimension to who and what we are, and there is,
Who and what we are is something performed: a story we tell.
It's not that it isn't real or true, necessarily. Performed doesn't mean fake.
It's just that it's curated.
For public consumption.
Who we really are, deep down
Our most vulnerable selves:
That is very rarely our public persona.
And there's a kind of appropriateness depending on context and relationship:
We wouldn't necessarily tell our deepest dearest dreams
to the check-out person at the market, for example,
But we might tell a close friend, a spiritual director, a spouse.
We might not be aware, though, that the ways we arrange ourselves for others
The ways we decide to tell our stories to others, moment to moment,
Often tells another sort of story:
A story about who we think these others are...
what we think they're interested in hearing or seeing from us.
And in fact it's *that* story that's the more *fundamental* story to us
It's our understanding of *that* story, of *their* story
that will determine the story we tell them about ourselves: who we are or become to them.
Problems, complications, even tragedy can arise, however,
When the story we tell about others
Is not the story they would tell about themselves.
And we can get ourselves wrong
Because we've gotten someone else wrong.

Something like that is going on in our parable from Luke this morning.
In Jesus' descriptions of the Pharisee and the publican
In his narration of each of their prayers,

Two parallel stories are being told by each.
The first story is about the person praying.
The second story is about the one *to whom* they're praying.
In each case, it's this second story that shapes, informs,
Even allows for the possibility of telling that first.

Our Pharisee this morning says:

"God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.
I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess."

God, he says, thank you that I'm not a sinner like other people,
but really very righteous, because of these various things that I do.

Which you obviously approve of, which is good for me

Otherwise I'd be like other folks, which I'm not.

I've got everything under control. They don't.

So. As you can see. I'm fine. I'm really fine.

You don't need to worry about me. I'm glad we've had this chat.

That's the Pharisee's story about himself.

It's a story that might be familiar to us.

It's a story we might have told ourselves

Or a story we might have heard others tell.

Or both.

It tells a particular story about God, though, too.

We heard this morning that the Pharisee

"stood and prayed thus with himself"

but the Greek is a little more evocative:

The Pharisee is "praying *to* himself."

There's a sense that the God he imagines listening to his prayer,

Is a God made in his own image,

the sort of God who shares all of his own biases and prejudices

Who approves of all of his own divisions of the world into "us"es and "them"s,

A God who cares more for the righteous than for the unrighteous (if he cares for *them* at all)

A God, let's be honest, from whom no grace can be sought

Because even if this God wanted to give some sort of grace

There would be no room for it. Certainly no consciousness of need for it.

In the Pharisee's story, there is no need for forgiveness or mercy.

Consequently, he's capable of receiving neither;

Consequently, he's capable of giving neither.

The tragedy of the Pharisee's prayer

Is that, in misunderstanding God's story

He misunderstands his own as well

Which means that who he truly is

His deep down most vulnerable self

Is unavailable to God

And unknown even to himself.

Beloved, God cannot heal

What we will not allow him to touch.

The Pharisee's tragedy has repercussions.

Our reading actually starts with a description of those repercussions:

Jesus "spoke this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous,
and despised others"

If the story we tell about God is not actually God's story
We will wind up trusting in our own righteousness and regarding others with contempt
We will wind up participating in systems of division and oppression
By which we build myriads of walls between the good and wonderful us
And the awful and horrible them
And our sense of our own righteousness will depend not on anything that's *actually* good
But will depend on making sure that
others stay other,
stay rejected,
stay down.
And we know what that looks like.
It looks like racism, anti-semitism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, ageism,
myriad ways our death-infected world suffers with its sin-sickness, and we in and with it.
And that's the great irony of so many incredibly seductive interpretations of this parable,
I'm sure you've heard any number of them:
The baddies are always the Pharisees, the goodies are the publicans, the tax collectors.
And these interpretations re-inscribe the very problems that the parable is meant to address.
But this is the subversive brilliance of the parable from the very outset:
In Jesus' world, the Pharisees were seen as models of what it meant to obey God
Models of truly righteous living, and righteous living *in extremis*—
They were following and traditioning the law under the oppressive conditions
Of the occupying Roman imperial government and culture.
Make no mistake: they were heroes.
True heroes.
The publicans, the tax collectors, were those who *colluded* with the Roman authority,
who extorted money from their own people, who got wealthy off of ill-gotten gains.
They were considered con men, criminals and traitors.
The brilliance of the parable is that Jesus subtly gets us all
To desire to consider ourselves
Criminals.
In getting us to the place where we can identify with the outsider,
Jesus is actually showing us who we all are and who God is:
We are *all* outsiders, in our sin, with respect to the divine life
But through Christ, who came among us identifying with the oppressed and the outsider,
who was despised, rejected and died the criminal's death on the Cross,
who in the Resurrection has freely offered forgiveness and love to the very people
to us
who devised his death
Through Jesus Christ, God has placed us on the inside of his grace,
the inside of God's own story.
The Pharisee and the publican: it's not them and us.
They're both us.

Now the publican's prayer is, at first glance, a lot simpler than the Pharisee's
But there's a lot going on here.
So before we cast our lot with the publican
Let's look at his prayer
Look at his story
And see what we're signing up for.
First of all, he's described as "standing afar off."
And this farness is not relative to the Pharisee
But relative, instead, to the Holy of Holies,

the heart of the Temple which was seen as the very throne of God on earth.
He's standing far off, out of humility, yes, and because what he desires is an encounter.
That distance is a sign of his desire to receive God
His desire that God fill up the distance, that God mend the separation that he cannot.
Moreover, the publican's head is bowed down,
Yes out of humility
And because he desires God to lift it
He's living out Psalm 3:3
"Thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory and the lifter up of mine head."
Which is all to say:
The tax collector has come to a place in his life
A place in his story
In which he realizes: he cannot tell his own story truthfully unless he tells God's story fully
he cannot be himself, if he will not let God be God in and to him
And he passionately desires that God be God in and to him
That's actually the substance of his stance, the substance of his entire prayer
"God, be merciful to me a sinner!"
What he's saying, the hard, startling truth of what he's saying is:
God, as a sinner, I have nothing to give you. I have nothing to offer you
I have no righteousness of my own of which I can boast.
But I come before you
Without pretense or excuse, without dissembling or subterfuge
I come before you, humbly and honestly.
I come before you emptied of anything but a yearning for your mercy.
And I desire your mercy to fill me. I desire the substance of your grace.
A share of your own divine life.
I desire your life to be mine. You in me and I in you.
Be God in me.
This is a prayer of great humility
A prayer of profound and mystical faith
of incredible boldness.
Trusting in God's mercy,
the publican made the fullness of his humanity,
including his sinfulness,
especially his sinfulness
every part of his broken heart
available to God
In fact, he reveals his humanity by emptying himself
By acknowledging the poverty of his soul before God
Laying nakedly bare the deep down vulnerable depths of himself to God.
And how does God respond?
God makes his righteousness available to the publican.
God fills the publican with the divine fullness
God ones himself with the publican
And he went down to his house, justified
Which is to say:
God's righteousness had become his righteousness
God's grace the place of his abiding
God's story his story.
The God of the publican's prayer
Is so different from the God of the Pharisee's prayer, chiefly in that
The God of the publican's prayer

Is a God of astounding and abundant mercy
Even for the sinner
Especially for the sinner
Especially, in other words,
For us.
The surprising and counter-intuitive truth the publican's prayer uncovers
Is that God's mercy isn't for the worthy
The worthy have no room for it.
But the secret is: none of us are worthy
All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God
It's God's mercy that makes us worthy
If we would make room to receive it.

Beloved, if we want to tell our story rightly
As people, as Christians, as Church
If we would show the love of God to the world,
If we would be truly human, the way Christ, who emptied himself for us, is truly human,
We too must come empty, honest, poor, and naked before God,
In the deep down vulnerable depths of our souls
And receive the incomprehensible fullness of the Divine Being
From the flood of grace that infinitely pours from Christ's own wounded heart
We must let God's love live in and through us.
We must let God tell God's story of boundless compassion, endless love, infinite mercy,
in and through us.
And we can make a start today, now,
By praying with all humility and with all boldness
"God, be merciful to me a sinner."
"God, be merciful to me a sinner."
"God, be merciful to me a sinner."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.