

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22

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2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18

Pentecost 23 C

Luke 18:9-14

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Today we hear Jesus describing two men who appear to be a clear example of a good guy and a bad guy. There seems to be no question about whom we're supposed to like, whom we should root for and who is the hero of the story. The Pharisee's actions and words make him the obvious fall guy. He is loud, arrogant and too sure of himself. We hear his self-satisfied prayer: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

It is tempting to think, "I am so glad I am nothing like the conceited Pharisee." If so, however, we are actually belittling him with our thoughts and actions while thinking too highly of ourselves. Jesus makes His point in a way which is hard to dodge.

Then there is the tax collector. He seems humble, down on his luck, not even looking up at God. We assume we should be cheering him on as the "good guy" in the story. Yet this story gets tricky because both men are complex, flawed, and needy ... just like ourselves and the people we know. Jesus is not describing one-dimensional characters.

What do we know about tax collectors in the Bible? Quite a bit, actually:

- Tax collectors worked for the Romans, who ruled and dominated the Jews.
- Tax collectors took money from their fellow citizens and turned it over to the enemy.
- These tax collectors demanded additional money to keep for themselves.
- Their graft caused suffering and resentment for the oppressed people of Israel.

In short, tax collectors were not nice people. When this particular man guiltily confesses, "God be merciful to me, a sinner," he isn't being modest, nor is he exaggerating. He really has done bad things and has been the source of pain to many people.

The difference between him and the Pharisee is in recognizing his sinful ways and great need of forgiveness. The tax collector knows he needs

help, and asks for it. This is his strength ... not in being a "good" man, but in the wisdom to throw himself on the mercy of God.

Jesus puts the words of Psalm 51 into the tax collector's mouth as his prayer of confession. If there are times when we don't know what to say to God, we can turn to the psalms, which offers a full range of prayers, as the tax collector did. The psalms offer us a prayer for every occasion. Even if all we do is to simply read a psalm out loud, this is one way to talk to God.

It might surprise you to discover the Pharisee also uses a psalm as the basis of his prayer. He turns to Psalm 17, which says, "Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right. If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped."

This psalm allows the Pharisee to recount a life lived by the letter of the law. Do you know someone who follows every rule, who sits at a red light in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere because the light is red and the law says you're supposed to wait? This Pharisee doesn't break laws. He never intentionally hurts someone. In many ways, this man is the faithful church member we all long to be, the one who tithes, working at church suppers, serving on committees, attending Bible studies. But the Pharisee has a blind spot, ignoring the wise words of Paul, who tells us we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The Pharisee somehow believes his own action will save him in God's sight. He doesn't ask for any guidance or wisdom because he can't see his own limitations.

The Pharisee rightly recognizes this tax collector is a sinner and a pretty miserable person. What the Pharisee fails to understand is how even those who try very hard to do the right thing all the time are in need of God's forgiveness and grace. The tax collector relies completely on God's mercy. He understands his deep need with a heartfelt prayer.

We don't want to leave today saying, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like the Pharisee." Jesus is teaching us how to pray, to admit our need, ask for help and be open to what God can do. With this story, Jesus encourages us not to be so quick to judge our neighbors. Instead of focusing on someone else's relationship with God, we can pay more attention to our own.

We, like all others, are sinners; and need to view our neighbors with compassion; looking daily for the saving help which can only come from God. Keep praying ... humbling ourselves in the sight of the Lord ... believing Christ desires to lift us all up ... in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.