



Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
October 27, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A young couple was driving to the courthouse to get married in front of the Justice of the Peace when the guy swerved to miss a squirrel and crashed the car into a tree, killing them both. They arrived in heaven, standing before St. Peter, and they asked if it would be possible for them to go ahead and get married anyway since they were so close to the ceremony when they died. St. Peter said, “hold on, let me go check.” Minutes went by, then hours, and then actual days passed with no sign of the Saint. Finally after a couple of weeks he came back and said “yes, you can be married here in heaven,” and the couple asked “why did it take so long to get an answer?” and St. Peter said, “you wouldn’t believe how long it took me to find a priest up here!”

I was reminded of this joke because today’s parable from the Gospel draws our attention to the dangers of false religiosity. To understand that we have to know how the two characters in this story would have been perceived by people in Jesus’ time. Based on all the outward appearances, the people of ancient Judea would have perceived the Pharisee to be a very religious man of righteousness and goodness, destined for heaven. The Tax Collector they would have seen as a terrible sinner, destined for hell, because Tax Collectors were collaborating with the Roman Empire that occupied Judea. They cheated their fellow citizens to enrich themselves while helping the hated Romans to strip the wealth of their homeland away and export it back to Rome. At one point in Jewish history tax collectors were so despised that their offerings were not accepted at the Temple.

To translate it into our modern terms, the Pharisee might have been perceived in the way that we today would perceive a priest or a missionary traveling to a place of great need to help others. While the tax collector might have been perceived the way we today would perceive a thief or a murderer.

Yet Jesus says that it was the tax collector – the equivalent of the thief or the murderer – who goes home in a right relationship with God and not the Pharisee – the equivalent of the self-sacrificing missionary. Why?

I believe that it's because the tax collector humbly and gratefully acknowledged his deep need for God's love and grace while the Pharisee assumed that he was just fine as he was, without any need for love and grace from God. The most important factor in our relationship with God is not how we're behaving. The most important factor in our relationship with God is whether we are humbly and gratefully acknowledging our dependence on God. It is only when we humbly and gratefully acknowledge that our lives depend on God's love that we can truly begin to be the people we were created to be.

Since today is the day we are distributing pledge cards for the upcoming year, I'll just briefly mention how that kind of humble, grateful dependence on God impacts the way we handle our money. You'll notice that among the acts of righteousness that the Pharisee mentions to God that he wants credit for is tithing. In the Pharisee's worldview he is not humbly grateful for all the blessings that God has given him – rather, he expects God to be humbly grateful for the ten percent that he has so generously decided to give to God.

But Jesus is calling us to look beyond mere legalistic standards like tithing. The question is not whether we have given 10 percent, 1 percent, or 50 percent of our income to God. The real question is whether our giving reflects how deeply, humbly, grateful we are for all God has given us. I encourage you to do with your pledge card what I hope I will be able to do with mine: take stock of all the many wonderful blessings that God has given us, humbly and gratefully recognize that all that we have and all that we are is God's gift to us, and then pledge to give to God through All Saints Church in a way that reflects the depth of how richly we've been blessed. That might be a tithe, or it might be less than a tithe – and it very well could be more than a tithe – but whatever we discern God is calling us to give we want to give it with humble and thankful praise for all that God has given us.

As our passage from Sirach says this morning, may we “give to the Most High as he has given to” us and may we give “as generously as” we “can afford.”

Amen.