

Sermon - October 23, 2016

Text: Luke 18: 9-14

Theme: It is God's mercy, not our humility, that saves.

We all make mistakes. One afternoon a carpet layer had just finished installing carpet for a woman. He stepped out for a smoke, only to realize that he had lost his cigarettes. After a quick, but fruitless search, he noticed that in the middle of the room, under the carpet that he had just installed, was a bump. His cigarettes! "No sense pulling up the entire floor for one pack of smokes," the carpet layer said to himself. So, he got out his mallet and flattened the bump. Not long after, as he was cleaning up, the woman came in. "Here," she said, handing him his pack of cigarettes. "I found them in the hallway. Now," she said, "if only I could find my parakeet." Oops. Sometimes we know when we've made a mistake. Sometimes we don't.

It's the ones we don't see that can really bite us. The magazine *Mental Floss* (March-April 2007) has a list of the 20 greatest mistakes in history. They include: The mistake that burned down London on September 1, 1666, when royal baker to the king didn't pay close enough attention to the oven. The fire burned for five days. In the end, it wiped out 13,000 homes and leveled 80 percent of the city. And the mistake that sobered America up. Prohibition in the United States, from 1920 to 1933, seemed like a good idea at the time, but ended up providing the breeding ground for organized crime which met the demand for alcohol in profitable, violent and destructive ways. And the mistake that killed John Wayne when filming the movie *The Conqueror*, downwind from a nuclear testing facility. At least 91 of the 220 people who worked on the movie contracted cancer, and more than half of them died — including John Wayne.

So what do we do when we make mistakes? We admit them. We examine ourselves. We are honest and we are humble because all of us are capable of making mistakes. That seems to be the pretty straightforward lesson in our gospel when Jesus contrasts a self-exalting Pharisee with a humble tax collector and it is the tax collector who comes out the winner. But once again this parable is not that simple and it is not about us. It is about God and God's mercy, proclaiming that it is God's mercy, not our actions, even our humility, that saves. And that is the theme of my sermon today – God's mercy, not our humility, saves.

Our gospel is Jesus telling a parable about a Pharisee and tax collector, addressing it to people who feel self-righteous, and regard others with contempt. Paul Tillich, commenting on the Apostle Paul's assertion that the gospel is a stumbling block, once said that the danger is stumbling over the wrong thing. That would be very easy to do with this parable so we are going to try and step with some care.

It's difficult to avoid interpreting the parable in straightforward, even simplistic terms, in part because the action of this parable is so very predictable even to those with limited knowledge of the story of Jesus' life. Knowing that the Pharisees are often cast as Jesus' opposition, we all too easily judge the Pharisee to be a self-righteous hypocrite and assume that the moral of this story is to be humble. Makes perfect sense. The difficulty with such an interpretation is that we might as well end up preaching, "Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or even like that Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to Scripture, and we have learned that we should always be humble." And what happens – we end up just like the Pharisee – puffing up our own behavior as we look down on others who aren't so humble!

David Lose suggests that in order to avoid this kind of self-congratulatory reading of the parable that the parable itself would seem to condemn, it may help to note that, in fact, everything the Pharisee says is true. He has set himself apart from others by his faithful adherence to the law. He is, by all standards, righteous! So before we judge him too quickly, we might reframe his prayer slightly and wonder if we have uttered it ourselves. Maybe we haven't said, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people...", but what about, on seeing someone down on his luck, "There but for the grace of God go I"? It isn't that the Pharisee is speaking falsely, but rather that the Pharisee misses the true nature of his blessing. As Luke states in his introductory sentence, he has trusted in himself. His prayer of gratitude may be spoken to the Lord, but it is really about himself. He locates his righteousness entirely in his own actions and being.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows that he possesses no means by which to claim righteousness. He has done nothing of merit; indeed, he has done much to offend the law

of Israel. For this reason he stands back, hardly daring to approach the Temple, and throws himself on the mercy of the Lord.

Here is the essential contrast. One makes a claim to righteousness based on his own accomplishments, while the other relies entirely upon the Lord's benevolence. Rather than be grateful for his blessings, the Pharisee appears smug to the point of despising others. In his mind there are two kinds of people: the righteous and the immoral, and he is grateful that he has placed himself among the righteous. The tax collector, on the other hand, isn't so much humble as desperate. He is too overwhelmed by his plight to take time to divide humanity into sides. All he recognizes as he stands near the Temple is his own great need. He therefore stakes his hopes and claims not on anything he has done or deserved but entirely on the mercy of God.

And it is God's mercy that declares him, the tax collector, righteous. "I tell you," says Jesus, "this man, this sinner who can only rely on God's mercy since he has nothing else going for him - went down to him home justified. . . ." It is interesting that this scene happens at the temple, where there are clearly insiders and outsiders, and according to the rules there is no doubt where the Pharisee and tax collector stand. But when Jesus dies all this changes. Remember what happens right before Jesus takes his last breath? The curtain of the temple is torn in town, erasing all divisions of humanity before God, so that God's mercy spills out even, especially to outsiders! For God is determined to justify the ungodly, the unrighteous, not because they are humble, but because God is God and acts with mercy. This parable is about God and how God acts and how God saves.

What is true for the tax collector is true for us. No matter how much we have going for us, we cannot justify, save ourselves. A fifth-grader came home from school very excited one day. She had been voted "prettiest girl in the class." The next day she was even more excited when she came home, for the class had voted her "the most likely to succeed." The next day she came home and told her mother she had won a third contest, being voted "the most popular." But the next day she came home extremely upset. The mother said, "What happened, did you lose this time?" She said, "Oh no, I won the vote again." The mother said, "What were you voted this time?" She said, "Most stuck-up."

We can focus on trying to get it right, to get it all together in order to prove that we are worthy, that we belong, that we are important or we can live in and through God's mercy. Instead of living by our human constructed divisions, trying to figure out who is in and who is out, we can live knowing we are dependent on God's mercy, knowing we are justified by the God of Jesus and invited to return to our homes in mercy, grace, and gratitude. That shifts not only how we view ourselves but how we treat others. I still remember one of my theology professors, Duane Priebe, telling us to be careful when we draw lines between people, because Jesus is always on the other side with "them." What might it look like if we reached out to "them," if we stood with "them," if there wasn't a "them" but all were part of "us"? That is a picture of salvation, of what God's mercy creates.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who came to the gates of heaven to be greeted by St. Peter who tells him he will need 1000 points to be admitted. The man starts listing all his accomplishments, his good deeds and St. Peter is impressed. "You will be pleased to know you have 327 points," St. Peter says. The man starts to sweat, comes up with more good deeds, but the most he can come up with is an additional 50 points. "I'm sunk! There's no hope for me! What more could I have done? O Lord, all I can do is beg for your mercy!" "THAT," exclaims Peter, "is a thousand points!"

God's mercy is amazing and abundant. Let's live in that which will not only save us at the end but will save us all now. Amen.