

C Lectionary 30 10.23.22

Luke 18:9-14

Focus Statement: God sees us, and loves us, exactly as we are.

I don't normally open sermons with a joke, but Joyce told me a really pertinent one at Bible chat on Wednesday, so I'm going to share it with you all. Note: consider this again your commercial on why it's super fun to come to Bible chat and you should come, there are sometimes great jokes. Anyway, on to the joke. There was a man who had two pets, a dog and a cat. The man was equal opportunity pet owner, he loved both pets the same and treated both with great care, attention, and concern. One day the dog, staring at his human with great appreciation, thought to himself, "the man feeds me, pets me, plays with me, snuggles me... he must be God." The cat, sitting by himself on the back of the sofa, thought to himself, "the man feeds me, pets me, plays with me, snuggles with me... I must be God."

It's a humorous insight on the nature of dogs and cats, but it is also an apt introduction to today's Gospel reading of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Like last week, this is one of those rare parables where Jesus tells us right off the bat what message we're supposed to take from this story. This is a parable for those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Clearly, this is a message on the importance of humility.

The parable opens with two men going "up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." Right off the bat we need to remind ourselves to take off our twenty-first century perspective of Pharisees and put on our first century perspective. Because as

often as they end up the foil in Jesus' stories, remember for his original audience, these are the good guys. The religious leaders and theological scholars. The ones who know all the stuff about God and teach that stuff to other people. We're supposed to like the Pharisee.

Except, immediately, the Pharisee makes himself unlikeable. The arrogant pomposity of his opening statement translates in any century, Jesus' audience gets the same feeling we get, this guy is a big annoying bragger. I mean, come on! "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." There is no language or culture in which thanking God for how much better you are than everyone else is not a self-aggrandizing statement. It's as snooty in the first century as it is today. Oh, but he goes on, naming the people he is better than: "thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector." The tax collector who is in the room with him is called out as someone he's better than. And why is he better than that guy? Oh, don't worry, he's about to tell us. He's better because, "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." And let's also point out here, no one is asking him to do those things. There is a scriptural call to fasting, but nothing says twice a week. And the tenth of all my income piece, the actual mandate is for a tenth of one's crops or animals. It's a hard nuance to get in today's economy, but it's sort of equivalent to asking if you're supposed to tithe your net or gross income, pretax or after tax. It's stewardship Sunday, but please don't ask me that question, I don't know. The Bible doesn't give tax advice. It calls us to be generous, and I'm afraid you're on your own to determine what that means for you. But I digress. The point is this guy is a big annoying bragger. Even his posture is annoying. The parable tells us he stood by himself, like he didn't want the sin of the less righteous to taint him in any way.

And then we have the tax collector. Who remember, with our first century sensibilities we are conditioned to see as a sinner, as someone who colludes with the Romans to cheat and steal from his neighbors. But immediately his actions set him up as someone to see sympathetically. Like the Pharisee, he too has stood off away from the crowd. But while the Pharisee's distance indicated distain for others, his was distain for himself. He didn't find himself worthy to be in the house of God, among God's people, so he stood apart, so his sin would not rub off on those around him. The common posture of prayer at the time was to look upward toward the heavens, but this man looked down, like a child about to be scolded who did not want to make eye contact, beating his breast and crying words from Psalm fifty-one, "Have mercy on me, O God" which he added his own clarifying statement, "a sinner."

And here's where the parable gets interesting dear people. And that interesting piece comes from, you guessed it, a translation error. Or at least an alternative interpretation, I cannot actually call it an error. The translator of this verse had to make a choice, and that choice is going to color how we read it. Verse fourteen reads, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other." Which makes sense. The tax collector who was humble went home justified for he asked for mercy, while the Pharisee did not, because he did not see the need for mercy. And that is a good translation of the Greek, but it's not the only translation. Dr. Matthew Skinner, New Testament Professor at Luther Seminary, points out that the word translated "rather" can also be translated as "alongside."

As in, “I tell you, this many went down to his home justified *alongside* the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled but those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Alongside the other, wait, what? How could both men go home justified? Especially given that last sentence about the humble being exalted and the exalted humbled. When does the Pharisee get what’s coming to him? Dr. Skinner pointed out, and I agree, that this reading offends his protestant work ethic, midwestern humility sensibilities. And it probably offended Jesus’ audience as well. Because the Pharisee was super pompous. We want people like that to get knocked back into place. But here’s the thing, dear people of God. God isn’t about what I want, God is about mercy, God is about love, and that love is for ALL people. Dejected tax collectors and really annoying Pharisees alike. Because let’s face it, this is a parable, so these are stock characters. In the real world all of us are, at various times, both Pharisee and tax collector, saint and sinner. And God’s grace and mercy is for all the parts of us, not just the not annoying parts.

But wait, I know you’re all saying now. That’s all well and good Pastor, God is grace and God loves everyone, yes. But it said right there at the end of the passage, you read it, that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. So how can both men go home justified if the exalted get humbled and the humbled exalted? This is Luke, there has to be some toppling of power players in here somewhere. And there is, I promise you, but not in the way you might expect, or the way I might like. See the humbling and the exalting come after the justifying. And justifying, by the way, is just a fancy church way of saying being loved completely and totally by God in a

way that cannot be changed or lost, no matter what. Both men go home justified because both men are children of God, part of the kingdom of God. But, just because we're justified, just because we're claimed by God as God's beloved children doesn't mean our growth in being God's people stops. In fact, one can argue, that's when it begins. It is when the Pharisee and the tax collector go home justified that real change starts to happen. We don't get to see that part of the story; we only see the being justified part. But in my imagination, I see the tax collector falling in with a community who support him and encourage him, help him to learn from his past mistakes rather than let them define him, and help him see in himself the love of God. And for the Pharisee, I see him someday having his arrogance laid bare. I hurt for him for how painful that will be, when he is finally forced to deal with how his arrogance has hurt and driven away others. I hope and pray that he too had a community to love him, support him, and show him a better, truer, less obnoxious version of himself.

Dear people of God, both men, and us, go home justified, because God is a God of transformation, grace, and love. And through that love, through that grace, through a God who is with us. Whether we have set ourselves apart or drawn ourselves away, whether we are sure we are too good to need God or too far gone to be redeemed, God finds us where we are, sees us as we are, and loves us as we become who God sees us to be. Thanks be to God, who gives up on neither the lost nor the obnoxious, or anyone in between.

Amen.