

St. Stephens, Newport News, VA
 October 27th, 2019
 30th Sunday after Pentecost/C
 A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Luke 18:9-14

“...Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command...”¹

That was what we prayed in our collect prayer this morning as we began our worship. We asked God to “...increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity...”. Just a moment ago we just heard Father Dick Budd read Jesus’ two-person short story of the religious person and the tax collector. For a short story, it packs a powerful punch. In that story the gifts of faith, hope, and charity are struggling for their lives.

First Jesus acquaints us with a very religious man, known as the Pharisee, who was devoted to prayer, study and the strict observance of religious ceremonies. This religious man was in the Jewish temple offering his prayers. While normally prayer is a good thing, quickly the Pharisee begins thanking God that he is not like the man next to him: a publican or tax collector, a man dedicated to fleecing people to entice them to pay their taxes. Though the Pharisee may appear to be devoted to God, he could care less about the tax collector. So much for hope and charity.

Next Jesus gives voice to a person whom people who heard Jesus tell this story would have considered to be a despicable man; a man whom they hated with a vengeance. “Publicans,” the word our older King James Bible translation used for tax collectors, were wealthy people who contracted with the oppressive Roman government to collect the taxes. Most publicans were Jews who were despised as traitors by their fellow Jews. No self-respecting Jew would have anything to do with publicans; persons whom they considered to be the scum of the earth.

It is easy to realize the hatred people had for the tax collector when you realize what he did for a living. If you think that our Internal Revenue Service produces aggressive agents, you can multiply that by a factor of about 10 and you’ll get our tax collector. Nobody had any reason to like this despicable man, not the least the religious Jew.

Next comes Jesus shock to hearers as he told the story. Most people of Jesus’ day would have been sure that the Pharisee, with his outward faith and standing in the Jewish temple, would have been God’s favorite. Yet Jesus told them that the tax collector, the despicable sinner, was the type of person whom God honored rather than the Pharisee.

¹ Collect Prayer for the Sunday closest to October 26, Book of Common Prayer (1979), 235.

In Jesus' story the sinful tax collector opens his heart and his soul to God. Looking down at the ground we hear his words, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"² To put his words into today's language, he's saying "God, My bad."

My bad. Have you ever wondered how the phrase "my bad" has become so popular in today's conversation? Many believe the expression came from a former National Basketball Association player by the name of Manute Bol. Bol was a Sudanese immigrant and a native speaker of Dinka. It's been said that when Bol threw a bad pass or missed a basket he would say "My bad," instead of "my fault. Shortly all of his teammates, then the Washington Bullets, began saying the same thing when they made an error in play: my bad.

History teaches us that in life our "bads" can get out of control and destroy us, unless we are able to honestly acknowledge our faults and seek forgiveness. For the religious Jew, the Pharisee, his refusal to accept his "bads" created a significant blind spot within him. Those blind spots kept him from seeing God's grace and goodness in the people who were around him.

For most of us it's a challenge to be honest about our human weakness and failure. Your might even go so far as to say that such honesty is taboo in our society and culture. It's just not cool to admit your mistakes or that you need help.

On Friday I was having lunch with some of my fellow diocesan staff members. I made the comment to them that the Sunday gospel lesson may be more than a little tempting to those who see the pompous religious Jew in Jesus' parable as an analogy to their most disliked political leaders whose pomposity they find hard to tolerate. Just then one of my colleagues said that the real issue is that the religious and pompous Jew in Jesus' story is really every one of us. That's the real problem!

In honesty, we are all too much like the Pharisee. All too often the evidence in our every day behavior shows that we neither love God nor do we love our neighbor. How could the Pharisee love God when he was so full of himself? Like the Pharisee, how n we love our neighbors when all we allow ourselves to see is THEIR sinful shortcomings? Like the Pharisee, we're missing the forest for the trees.

This is a good point to remember that Jesus offered us a corrective when we're having trouble dealing with our neighbors. Jesus' commandment to his followers was, "Love one another as I have loved you."

As we ignore God and exalt ourselves and our values at the expense of those who are different or other, the spirit of the Pharisee is alive and well within us. We all have it in us to say, "I thank you, God, that I am not like...", and you fill in the blank. It becomes easy for us to see such persons as worthless characters rather than persons.

² Luke 18:c, NSRV.

In the 17th century there was a slave ship captain by the name of John Newton who dramatically came to faith in the risen Lord Jesus. Later in life he became a priest and wrote many of the hymns we know today. The most well known is the hymn which is said to have captured his experience of leaving the slave trade and coming to faith in Jesus: “Amazing Grace.” In that beloved and well known hymn is his proclamation of self-deprecation; that grace existed for “a wretch like me.” John Newton and the tax collector knew that the only hope they had in life was the grace and love of Jesus.”³

This story of the Pharisee and the tax collector is another of Jesus’ great reversals in which he turns upside down the societal, religious and cultural expectations. We have met these characters before in Luke. You can see it in the older and younger sons in what we know as the Prodigal Son. The wayward son who “comes to himself,” who falls all over himself and comes begging back to his father is in rich contrast to the self-righteousness of his older brother.

The challenge before us is to see the image of God in the people around us. Step into a city bus, sit down in a movie theater, walk on a college campus or attend a sporting event and you tend to see lots of different people — different skin colors, hairstyles, tattoos, piercings, body shapes and makeup choices. Some of these differences repel you and you step back, just like the Pharisee moved away from the crowd, not wanting to associate with unclean people. But these differences are all superficial, and for the most part are not true reflections of the nature of a person. The really deep truth about any of those whom we meet in our daily lives is that they are children of God; all created in the image and likeness of God.

It is incredibly easy to judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. When I was a child I learned many things that formed me today and to this day govern my actions. Many of the things I learned were good, but not all. One of the things I learned as a child growing up in the segregated south was racism. In fact I have learned it so well that I have spent the majority of my adult life trying to be aware that the sin of racism and condescension is a darkness that resides in heart, and if I allow it, will control my attitudes about other people. Like the Pharisee in the parable, it’s always been easy for me to see sin in others, but not in myself.

When we are so deceived with our own goodness, we are not honest with God — or honest with ourselves — at a time when we need to place our need for forgiveness before the God who loves us. The tax collector saw himself clearly, and he confessed his sinfulness, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13).

All of this begs the question: HOW do I get to a place where I can see the image of God in others, show mercy instead of judgment, and recognize my own need for forgiveness?

As a start, it may be a good idea to pray daily that bit of our collect prayer: “...increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise,

³ John Newton, “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound,” 1779.

make us love what you command..." Jesus commands us to love one another, no exceptions. No, none at all.

AMEN.