

Sermon ✝ October 23, 2022

Luke 18:9-14

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The word *gospel* means “*good news*”, but in most gospel stories there is both good news and bad news. Such is the case in today's reading from Luke.

The story is familiar and that makes it a difficult text to preach. Some Bible stories have become so familiar that we no longer hear the shattering force that they had when Jesus told them. Let's try to hear this story as if for the first time and let's begin by noting in the story and the place where the action occurs.

There are only two characters in this story: the Pharisee and a tax collector.

The two could not have been more different. One was a success and one was a failure. But which was the success and which was the failure? This is the question that makes the story interesting.

The Pharisee is a moral success and the tax collector a moral failure. But, on second glance, the situation is somewhat less clear. Although a moral success, the Pharisee was a *religious* failure. And the tax collector? Although he was a moral failure, was a religious success.

None of us have ever met any real Pharisees, but we have met their modern counterparts. Not long ago, Pharisees could be found in grim, joyless churches that defined righteousness in negative terms: We don't smoke, we don't drink, we don't play cards, go to the movies . . . You fill in the blanks. These are the folks who were accused of singing: “*We are the Lord's elected few. Let all the rest be damned. There's room enough in hell for you. We won't have heaven crammed!*”

Today's Pharisees are all too often found in churches who send their ambassadors out into the suburbs to knock on doors . . . smiling just a bit too much . . . to ask us if we know that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives. Unfortunately, the narrowness of their religion suggests what they really believe is that God hates us and has an awful plan for our lives.

These are the folks who are never convinced that we can really be Christians unless we enroll in their program of spiritual awakening.

The tax collector, in contrast, lacked business ethics but was a religious success. He is the alcoholic who has finally admitted that he is an alcoholic. She is the unwed mother who is struggling to give her children a better life and more opportunities than she could ever hope for herself. He is the person who has come to the end of his rope and has let go . . . acknowledging his failure and casting himself into hands of a loving God.

The tax collector is the one who has realized that he cannot climb up to God on a ladder of accomplishments.

When we realize that we cannot draw near to God by piling success upon success, we are tempted to give up. But when in the dark night of the soul we say, “*God have mercy upon me,*” God draws near. A moment of grace.

Okay, so much for the characters . . . we now know quite a bit about them . . . but do we really know them? And what does this story have to do with our lives?

A useful Bible study technique is to put ourselves into the biblical event about which we are reading. (Unfortunately, I like to flatter myself.)

I imagine myself going to the manger with the Wise Men (in reality the journey would have been too long for me).

I like to imagine myself staying awake with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (I would have dozed off with the disciples).

And I like to think that I would have gotten up early with Mary Magdalene on Easter (but I would have kept hitting the snooze button).

So, which person would you be in this story from Luke? The Pharisee or the tax collector? We like to think that we would be penitent publicans rather than proud Pharisees. But, would we?

It's all too easy to come before God with a list of our accomplishments. It's hard, desperately hard, to come before God with a catalog of our moral failures.

One very sad commentary on our present-day society is that no one (almost no one) is ever wrong. People still sin, but seldom will admit it. To admit that you are less than perfect is not fashionable to do in these times in which we live.

The other feature of this story is to note the location of the action. The Pharisee and the tax collector went up to the temple to pray. We find ourselves in a temple.

Are we here to brag about our accomplishments or to acknowledge our failures? We need to remind ourselves that we are on the side of the tax collector and not the Pharisee. But like the Pharisee, we offer God our success.

The bad news is that our successes and our accomplishments are not enough. The good news is that God accepts us as we are; God wants our failures, too.

Today's Gospel reading invites us to offer God our moral failures and all else that destroys us. Offer God the alienation that has come between you and a family member. Offer God the destructive behavior that has you in its grip. Offer God the hopelessness, verging on despair, that makes you wonder whether or not to get out of bed in the morning.

To admit to one another and especially to our God that we are not perfect . . . is to simply say that we are human.

And when we recognize this as the way things are and in this life always will be, we are tempted to despair. But instead, we should offer all of this to God, for God is in the business of taking our imperfections, and our brokenness and our doubts; *and* replacing them with forgiveness and healing and acceptance and grace.

After all, it was this same God who took a cross, the cruelest instrument of judicial murder ever devised, and turned it into the instrument of our redemption and the sign of eternal hope.

God have mercy upon us, sinners all. Amen.