

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 23, 2022

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

Scripture Readings

Genesis 4:1-15

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 18:9-17

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house

justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

Sermon

I once heard a scholar of Martin Luther say that the Reformation was, at its heart, a revival in the art of preaching, particularly in preaching the Gospel. Luther himself, while he was certainly a scholar and professor, was also at heart a preacher, and he left behind hundreds of sermons. Today, as we look forward to next week's yearly Reformation commemoration, I would like to give you a taste of Luther's own preaching. This is not an entire sermon of his; he typically preached far longer than any modern Lutheran pastor will. But it is taken from one of his sermons on today's Gospel reading:

The Gospel reading brings two extraordinary people to our notice, who come before God seeking righteousness. One is the beautiful saint, the Pharisee; and the other, the poor, sorrowing sinner, the tax collector. We also hear two strange sentences of judgment, entirely opposed to human wisdom and reason. It condemns the great saints as unjust, and declares the worst sinners acceptable, righteous, and holy. The text speaks of saints who trusted in themselves to find righteousness in their own lives and works; and of sinners who desired to be free from their sins, and longed for forgiveness and the grace of God.

The Pharisees were the very first, most upright and pious people, who with all earnestness tried to serve God and keep the law. The tax collectors were regarded as no better than a godless heathen. It is indeed wonderful that Christ brings two such people together, who are so entirely different and the farthest removed from each other; and still more wonderful, and even offensive, that He expresses such weighty judgment, condemning the Pharisee and declaring the tax collector righteous.

Nevertheless He does not reject such works like those the Pharisee boasts about, good works that are neither to be condemned nor punished, but good and worthy of praise. On the other hand, He can neither boast about nor praise the tax collector for his life and works, for he is forced to condemn himself as a sinner, and can think of no good he has done.

Yet Christ finds nothing good in the Pharisee, not on account of the works, which in themselves are not wrong; but because the person was not good, but rather full of iniquity. On the other hand, in the tax collector, a public, condemned sinner, He now finds a good tree and good fruit, although He does not shine forth with the great works of the Pharisee.

The Pharisee's entire life is spent in obedience to God. He shows himself as one who worships the true and only God, and seeks His kingdom and His will. He confesses that he has everything from God. He thanks Him for all He has given him, especially that He preserves him from sin and shame, that he is not like the public sinners and tax collectors. Here you see nothing but beautiful works. He also observes the Sabbath, because he goes into the temple to seek God and to pray.

He is not unjust, a robber, adulterer, like so many people. He is a man who has done no wrong, no violence or pain, nor oppressed or offended against the commandments. He has led a chaste life, kept his body in subjection and discipline; and also fasted twice every week.

Above all this, he was not an extortioner of his neighbor's goods and honor, but gave the tenth of all he had honestly and fairly earned for the support of divine worship and the priestly office, and does not lay up anything in a miserly spirit. Here he appears to the world a paragon of godliness, a fine, pious, godfearing and holy man, who is to be applauded as a mirror and an example for the whole world. The world would be very lovely if it had many such people.

Now contrast the tax collector with this picture, and you see there is no resemblance to the Pharisee. Little virtue or honor can be found in him. He does not only fail to give any of his goods for the service of God, but even robs and steals from his neighbor. He is a man who with his sinful life is a public example. His conscience is depraved, and there is no good to hope from him.

Now how does it happen so contrary, that the pious, good, and righteous Pharisee is condemned of God and the sinful, unrighteous tax collector is justified? Will God now speak and decide against His own law? Or does God delight in those who do no good and are nothing but robbers, adulterers and unjust? By no means, but we have here quite another and higher law than the world or flesh and blood understand, that looks deeper into the hearts of both these persons, and finds in the Pharisee a great evil principle that destroys all that might be called good. This great evil is called to trust in self and despise others.

Such is the reproach of this fine man, who is great before the world. If only he were the only one, and he had not left so many children, so many who are like him still today. For the whole world with all the best there is in it, is altogether drowned in this vice. So this Pharisee and those like him, with their fine discipline and honor, before God are worse than a robber, a murderer, and an adulterer.

The Pharisee is placed before the judgment seat of God, and finds that although he has indeed many beautiful, praiseworthy gifts and good, pious works, yet a great blot of shame clings to them. For in the first commandment especially it is forbidden that a man should trust in himself or in his gifts, as this work-righteous person does. He struts forth and is tickled with the gifts he has received from God, as though he were the excellent holy man, whom God is bound to respect and honor. This is the great sin and vice against God. The Pharisee is blind and hardened, like an unbelieving heathen. He is without repentance and does not fear the wrath of God. He does not see that he and all men, even the true saints with all their righteousness, cannot stand before God; but are guilty of His wrath and condemnation. As David testifies, If You should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

The Pharisee does not seek either grace or forgiveness of sins, nor does it occur to him that he stands in need of them. Here you see what a man is, who is moved by his own free will. For this Pharisee is the highest example of what a man can do by his strength according to the law. It is certain that all men are by nature from Adam no better. Such vices manifest in them, when they want to be holy and better than other people.

But now see this tax collector, who also comes into the temple, but with other thoughts and a different prayer than those of the Pharisee. In the first place he has the advantage that he confesses himself a poor sinner, convinced by his own conscience and condemned. He has nothing which he can boast about or be proud of before God or the world, but must be ashamed. For the law has so smitten his heart that he feels his misery and distress, and is terrified and filled with anguish at the judgment and wrath of God. He cries from his heart to be delivered. He is so burdened and oppressed that he dare not even lift up his eyes. He understands and feels that he has deserved nothing else than hell and eternal death, and must condemn himself before God, as he shows and confesses by beating his breast.

In short, there is truly nothing here but sins and condemnation, as much before God as those of the Pharisee; except that the Pharisee does not confess his filthiness, while the tax collector so feels his sins that he cannot stand before them. He must confess that he daily offends God with his disgraceful unthankfulness, contempt and disobedience for all His mercies and goodness. Therefore he must entirely despair in himself.

But the tax collector says, "God, be merciful to me the sinner!" Surely, this is the art of a great master, which is far above human understanding. For these two, sin and mercy, are opposed to each other, like fire and water. Mercy does not belong where sin abounds, but wrath and punishment.

How then does this man discover the art to unite the two and harmonize them? How dare he desire and call for grace to cover his sins?

This is the precious Gospel of God's grace and mercy in Christ, which is offered to condemned sinners without any merit of their own. This tax collector must have heard this, that he believes and holds that God will forgive sins and be merciful, turn away His wrath and eternal death for the sake of His Son, the promised Messiah.

God is merciful only to poor sinners; for before Him no one is innocent. So it is most difficult to say these two sentences from the heart, "I am a sinner," and "God be merciful to me." For we find in ourselves that there is still too much of the old Pharisee. Before God we are anxious to be good and righteous, and better than others. We would like God to approve what we have done.

Let those who can, become a student of this tax collector, that they grasp by faith the comfort of the Gospel of Christ, so that man can unite the two opposing words that are farther apart than heaven and hell. For what else do the words, "I am a sinner," mean than that God is my enemy and condemns me, and I have merited nothing but eternal wrath, the curse and condemnation?

But then remember: the Gospel teaches me that before God the highest wisdom is to know and believe that God has founded such a kingdom through Christ, that He will be gracious to help poor, condemned sinners. I am a sinner, but still God is gracious to me; I am by nature God's enemy, but He is still my Friend; I should justly be condemned, yet I know that He does not desire to condemn me, but to save me as an heir of heaven. This is His will, which He has had preached to me, and commanded me to believe for the sake of His dear Son, whom He has given for me.

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: Almighty and everlasting God, You are always more ready to hear than we to pray and always ready to give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour down on us the abundance of Your mercy; forgive us those things of which our conscience is afraid; and give us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask except by the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: **Amen.**

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: **Thanks be to God!**

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**