

Sermon for Pentecost 20c  
Proper 25c  
October 23, 2022  
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Los Alamos, New Mexico

Jeremiah 14:1-10,19-22  
Psalm 84:1-6  
2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18  
Luke 18:9-14

I have always been the good boy, the good son, the hard worker.

I have always wanted the approval of my father, but always seemed to fall short of his expectations.

I would do more, work harder, want praise, but I always felt it was never enough.

That's what it's about:  
for males it's the good son,  
for females it's the dutiful daughter.

Whatever you do, it's never right, no matter how hard you work,  
it's never enough, no matter who, what, when, where,  
nothing was ever good enough.

I don't know whether it was me or my father who was the judge of my life. When I was growing up, I don't remember his ever expressing his approval of me.

But, if he had said "I'm proud of you," I don't know that I would have heard him.

So I see myself in the Gospel story today, on both sides of the altar:  
the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

To me they seem to be brothers, each responding in their own way to how they think their father wants them to be.

The tax collector is the son I felt I was.

Always having to ask forgiveness for not living up to my perception of the expectation of my parents.

The tax collector is the model I have followed most of my life.

No matter what I achieved, I could never celebrate

because I had to move on to the next task.

The Pharisee is the model of the man I can be  
when I let my ego run wild.

In him, I can take full and complete credit for my achievements,  
and bask in the glory of my own abilities.

In the Pharisee, I am the center of my own universe.  
And I feel good indeed.  
I don't need the praise of my father.

Neither of these men are the model for whom I want to be.

That man is somewhere between them: to be humble and not grovel,  
to claim my abilities and still know that I owe whatever I do to God.

For me the model comes in the ground between these two brothers, ground on which they could  
recognize and reconcile who they are and how they can live together to grow into the men their  
heavenly father would have them be.

That's the problem here. There is no middle ground, only extremes.

Most of the commentaries I've read side with the tax collector  
as the righteous man in Luke's telling Jesus' tale.

Here's a man who cannot even look up, but only bow down and pray, probably beating his  
breast, saying: "God have mercy on me – a sinner."

And a sinner he was according to his culture.

If he was a Jew, he was considered among the worst of his fellows, a collaborator with the  
Empire of Rome.

Tax collectors had the reputation for cheating their own people, charging more than was due,  
because they were paid by what they collected over and above what was due.

Jesus says: "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified."

But was he justified?

He was humble, but did he change his life or his ways  
or quit cheating his own people?

Then you have the Pharisee.

Most commentaries hold this man up to scorn.

You would think that the Pharisees were the enemy of Jesus, given the depiction we see of them in the Gospels.

But were they, as a group, solely to be condemned,  
or were they just easy targets for the writers of the Gospels.

The Pharisees were one of the four major sects of Judaism during the period of Jesus' life.

There also were the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots.

The Zealots were the revolutionaries who wanted to throw off the Roman yoke by force.

Among their number were the Sicarii, who would provoke the Romans by personal attacks on soldiers and collaborators.

It all likelihood Barabbas, the man the crowd demanded to be released by Pilate, was a Zealot.

The Essenes were kind the Jewish equivalent of Christian monks, predecessors of the Desert Fathers and Mothers who retreated into the solitude of the desert.

They abandoned the worship of their ancestors  
to seek a new path through asceticism  
by disciplining their bodies and spirits to be children of the Light.

It has been suggested that John the Baptizer and Jesus may have come out of the Essene community.

The Sadducees were the descendants of the grandsons of Aaron,  
the tribe of the Levites, the priests of the people.

They oversaw the temple worship and made the sacrifices for atonement of individuals and of the people.

They believed in the strict interpretation of the law,  
and they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

The Pharisees, like the Essenes,  
believed in the discipline of the spiritual life,  
but they lived among the people.

Unlike the Sadducees,  
the Pharisees believed that the law was not hard and fast,  
but had to be reinterpreted  
in relationship with the lives of people in each generation.

They believed in the resurrection of the dead at the last day.

The Pharisees will be those who will change Judaism after the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., and model what will become Rabbinic Judaism, the source of what we know of Judaism today.

So if the Pharisees are NOT the enemies of Jesus, why do the writers of the Gospels spend so much time criticizing them?

It's often been said that Jesus' intention was to reform Judaism.

I'd like to suggest that the Pharisees find themselves the object of the lessons because Jesus saw them as those who could make a change in the way people were treated.

The Pharisees reinterpreted the Scriptures and made them relevant to the people of their day.

The law was not firm and fast and unbendable, but rather had to be made fresh for each successive generation.

These are the men that Jesus would like to convert to see the need for Justice in the world and to walk humbly with God.

Jesus calls the Pharisees to reflect on who they are in relationship with the people.

That's the lesson in Jeremiah.

There's no redemption in store for Israel in the prophecies of Jeremiah.

It's just too late, they will be taken into exile in Babylon for seventy years before being allowed to return to Jerusalem to start over again.

For the children of Israel, the guilt, as displayed by the tax collector, has always served to make them reflect and look inward to what needs to be changed.

So continues their cycle of exile and return, repentance and renewal.

That sense of fear and regret lingers for me behind the words of Paul in his letter to Timothy.

This second letter is considered Paul's Last Will and Testament Addressed to Timothy, the one man he has been able to depend on for all his ministry.

What we don't read today,  
the part that's left out, dramatizes what I'm saying:

“ Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.”

As he sits in his place of imprisonment in Rome,  
waiting for the end,  
for the final condemnation that he must die, Paul writes:

“I have fought the good fight,  
I have finished the race,  
I have kept the faith.”

Paul's words are what I hope to be able to say at the end of my life.

Perhaps it's what we each wish for ourselves and for those we care for.

As it says in the last verses of Psalm 84 that we didn't read today:

LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; \*  
    hearken, O God of Jacob. ...  
For the LORD God is both sun and shield; \*  
    he will give grace and glory;  
No good thing will the LORD withhold \*  
    from those who walk with integrity.  
O LORD of hosts, \*  
    happy are they who put their trust in you!

And in the next life, perhaps I can turn to my father and say:

Father, forgive me, I did the best I could.

Amen!