

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Psalm 65, Luke 18:19-24
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Two men were shipwrecked on a small deserted island. One had no religion, and the other was very religious and attended church. The one without religion said over and over, "We're going to die! We're going to die!" as he paced back and forth on the beach wringing his hands.

The religious man sat quietly with his back to a palm tree looking very serene. The frantic man finally turned to the other and said, "What's wrong with you? Don't you realize we're going to die here?" The religious man said, "We'll be fine."

"Fine!Fine!" the frantic man shouted. "We have no food, no water, and no way to make a fire for a smoke signal. How can you say, we are fine?"

The religious man said, "I make an annual salary of a million dollars and give \$100,000 a year to my church. Don't worry, my pastor will definitely find me."

Jesus tells a parable about two men as well, one very religious and the other not so much. The very religious Pharisee undoubtedly prays often and also reveals in his prayer that he fasts twice a week and tithes a tenth of his income. Jewish law only required fasting one day a year on the Day of Atonement and tithing only on the produce of one's fields. As you can see then, this Pharisee is exceptionally devout. We might compare him to a monk or nun today, who owns nothing, remains single and is devoted to an austere life of prayer and service. We don't want to follow in their footsteps, but we admire and respect their commitment. People felt the same way about Pharisees in Jesus' day.

The other man is a tax collector. Jews who contracted with the Romans to collect taxes for Rome were despised by their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters. This was for two reasons – first, because they cooperated with the foreign, gentile occupiers of Israel; and second, because the tax collectors demanded the money Rome required and more to line their own pockets. Most tax collectors were quite wealthy. Their profession afforded worldly riches at the expense of being hated and unwelcome in Jewish homes and synagogues.

This Pharisee, like all other Jews, had no regard for the tax collector praying nearby. He might well be grateful that he wasn't like him, but he liked himself a bit too much – so much so that he couldn't recognize a single fault within himself. That is easy to do when we compare ourselves only to the worst in our society – thieves, child abusers, murderers, and IRS employees who don't pay their taxes.

The Dalai Lama said, "To be aware of a single shortcoming within oneself is more useful than to be aware of a thousand in someone else." Perhaps a shortcoming most of us can identify within ourselves, then, is our tendency to too easily find fault with others.

The Pharisee has exalted himself by comparing himself to the least admired instead of comparing himself to the most noble. He has justified himself by listing his exemplary acts of piety. And all this is in the context of so-called prayer to God.

If prayer is to God alone, why is he looking around the room? A good reason to pray with our eyes shut. How often in church when we are supposed to be in God's presence are we distracted by the presence of others? God forbid we are having judgmental thoughts about them. We should all rush for the front pews so we'll have fewer people in front of us to critique.

The tax collector prays quite differently. It was probably hard for him to come to the Temple in the first place because he knew he would fall under the condemning eyes of others and hear the not-so-quiet whispers, "What is he doing here?" He keeps his head bowed and his eyes averted. Beating his breast as a sign of contrition and self disgust, his prayer is short and to the point: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

He seems to have, for the moment at least, realized that his chosen vocation is both harmful to the people and, therefore, offensive to God. He has hit bottom and prayed honestly from his heart admitting his depravity. God is drawn to honest confessions and rebuffs self-congratulatory fluff. He of the two, we're told, is justified or given a new beginning with God.

Remembering that this is a parable, the men represent polar opposite positions. Whereas the Pharisee obviously thinks too highly of himself, the tax collector thinks too poorly of himself. Hopefully, we live somewhere between these extremes. It is possible to experience an overly inflated sense of self for a short while, or be in the depths of self depravity for a brief time, but neither position is good for us for long. Prolonged heightened self estimation will lead to a big crash, and low self estimation over time will lead to crushing despair. Neither position honors the rightful place of God in our lives.

Among the many paradoxes of being human is that we are both at the same time made in the image of God and flawed by the weakness of the flesh. We are human and divine, capable of greatness and idiocy, sometimes in the same day. We are saint and sinner rolled up into one. To acknowledge one aspect of ourselves to the exclusion of the other, leads to conceit and arrogance or self-loathing and uselessness.

The answer to our dilemma is that God loves us and sent his Son into the world to prove it. Jesus lived, died and was resurrected for both the Pharisee and the tax collector and everyone else as well. We can be honest about our faults and failings because, like the tax collector, God will receive our honest confession with care and kindness. God already knows and pledges to help us change.

We don't need to toot our own horns or justify ourselves because we are already as loved and approved by God as much right now as we'll ever be. Let's hope the All Knowing One has better things to do than keep careful count of our screw-ups. God chooses to use us for good with our open wounds, scars and all.

St. Paul was admittedly an enemy of Jesus yet he would eventually do more for the cause of Christ than anyone in his day. He fought his demons, weaknesses and flaws daily with help from the Spirit to conclude finally that he had finished the race well.

May we remain ever trusting of God's full support knowing we don't run alone, and as undesirable as falling is, it can make all the difference in contributing significantly to a well lived life, as long as we don't stay down.

All we have is today. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may never arrive. Let us, therefore, live for God's glory, we who are gloriously made. AMEN.