

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Psalm 65, 18:9-14
October 23, 2016
David Teschner

Let's face it; neither of the two men in today's parable is very commendable. One has an over-inflated view of himself, and the other should be sorry for collaborating with the Roman enemy to exact more than the required tax from his fellow Jews. One commits the sin of honoring himself too highly, while the other commits the sin of making a living in a dishonorable way.

The Pharisee will go back to his house thinking that God is pleased with him and continue his extravagant piety and disdain for lowlifes. The tax collector may go back to his profession feeling guilty that he has let God and his fellow Jews down.

Which character best describes you? Hopefully neither, but I suspect we all have a little of each in us.

We all want to feel good about ourselves. We all want to think we are more good than bad. I guess this parable is about how we go about making ourselves feel better.

The Pharisee in today's parable does it by comparing himself to other people. The problem is that he compares himself to the wrong people. He chooses thieves, rogues, adulterers and tax collectors. Of course he is better than these. He should be comparing himself to Moses or Elijah, two of his faith's most highly regarded prophets.

The tax collector, on the other hand, doesn't compare himself to anyone but has the courage to face his God as he truly is – a miserable sinner.

Whereas the Pharisee stands proud and erect in the Temple, the tax collector is facing the ground and beating on himself. Their postures alone tell the whole story.

To watch the tax collector is painful. We don't care to see anyone brought so low. And yet only by being brought low does he have a chance of being elevated on high: "...for all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The story is told of a devout priest who lived alone not far from his church. Across the street from him lived a prostitute. Noticing the large number of men who visited her, the priest decided he had to speak to her. "You are a great sinner!" he said sternly. "You show your lack of respect for God and for yourself every day and every night. Do you never stop to think about what will happen to you after you die?"

The poor woman was shaken by what the priest had said. She prayed to God out of genuine repentance, begging his forgiveness. She also asked the Almighty to help her find another means of earning her living. When she could find no other work and went without eating for a week, she returned to prostitution. Now, however, each time she gave her body to a stranger, she would pray for forgiveness.

Annoyed that his admonishment had not worked for long, the priest decided to start keeping a count of all the men that went into the woman's house. He placed a stone in his front yard for every man that entered hers. After the stones began to pile up, he again approached the woman. "You see that pile of stones? Each one represents a mortal sin committed by you despite my warning."

Seeing this visual display of how her sins had accumulated, she began to tremble. Returning home she wept tears of repentance and prayed, "O Lord, when will your mercy free me from this wretched life?"

Her prayer was heard and that same day the angel of death came to her house and carried her off. Then, on God's orders, the angel crossed the street and took the priest with him, too.

The prostitute's soul went straight to heaven, while the priest's went straight to hell. When they passed each other, the priest was indignant and asked, "Where is God's justice? I spent my entire life in devotion and service, and now I am carried off to hell. She lived her whole life steeped in sin and is being born up to heaven."

The angel replied, "You thought God's love meant judging the behavior of your neighbor. While you filled your heart with the impurity of another's sin, this woman prayed fervently day and night. Her soul is so light after all the tears she has shed that we can easily bear her up to Paradise. Your soul is so weighed down with stones that it is too heavy to lift."

Khalil Gibran, author of [The Prophet](#), wrote, "Our worst fault is our preoccupation with the fault of others."

Similarly, the Dalai Lama once said, "To be aware of a single shortcoming within oneself is more useful than to be aware of a thousand in somebody else."

It is not easy to lay our souls bare to ourselves and to God. As I said earlier, we all want to feel good about ourselves, but let's not do it at the expense of others or on the backs of others. This may sound a bit strange, but it's been said that people in heaven celebrate their earthly sins throughout eternity.

Why? Because they know what would have happened without them. We can feel good about ourselves not because we are so good, but rather because God is so good. We feel good about his mercy, not our merits.

Unlike the Pharisee, who thanked God that he was not like other people, we can thank God that we are like other people, sinners of Christ's own redeeming. AMEN.