

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 23, 2020 – PENTECOST 20 / PROPER 25 (YR. C)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Confess, Repent, and Give*”

Sirach 35:12-17	(Give generously to the Lord, as He has given you)
Psalms 84:1-6	(How dear to us is the dwelling place of God)
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18	(St. Paul’s keeps the faith, despite his impending martyrdom)
St. Luke 18:9-14	(Jesus teaches: God will humble all who exalt themselves)

In the Gospel lesson we’ve just heard, Jesus tells a shocking story. Perhaps you didn’t notice? Many of us have heard the parables so often since we were kids, we already know what’s coming: It’s like watching a favorite movie for the tenth time. Another factor in our inattention is that the shocking bits tend to go straight over our heads. Yes, we know—or think we know—the pharisee. He’s like someone we’re acquainted with, who is so proud of their own rectitude and morality they have no compassion for anyone who doesn’t live up to their standards. It’s easy to be completely lacking in sympathy for this self-righteous person.¹ After all, we Episcopalians are tolerant, accepting, people. We strive to make our parishes welcoming places that are open to all who join, or want to join, us. We feel secure in disliking people who catalog the sins of others, and who are certain they are God’s particular friends and have His blessing for their “better” values.

We also approve of the penitence of the publican (as he’s called in the King James version). He bewails his faults and dares not even assume the customary attitude of Jewish prayer, standing up with arms extended. Instead, he grovels on the ground and begs God for mercy. Our admiration flows easily because in our culture we find his occupation little more than an annual annoyance.

However, we should remember who tax collectors were in Jesus’ day. They worked for the hated Romans, who not only were unclean gentiles, but also political oppressors, those who had conquered the land and ruled it with savage brutality at times. Jewish tax collectors in first-century Palestine were viewed as we would those who collaborated with the Nazis or the Soviets in occupied Europe during World War II.

Each tax collector was assigned an area to dun, and told to exact a certain sum of money. How much he extorted from the populace and pocketed for himself didn’t matter, as long as the Romans got their money. Possibly, no one in Jesus’ time was hated as much as a tax gatherer, even more despised than a self-righteous pharisee who looked down on those that didn’t meet his standards.

So when Jesus commends the tax collector, one can imagine the shock his hearers experienced. It would be as if He’d singled out someone who, in our time, ruined people with a Ponzi scheme, then entered our church to professes repentance in the company of those he had defrauded.

But the most important matter here is not what each man does for a living, however execrable or noble. The pharisee is an educated expert on the Jewish Law, and the publican is a lowlife tax collector. What Jesus wants us to understand is the nature of each person’s heart, and their attitude toward God. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible we use in church tends to smooth out the awkwardness of the Greek text which more accurately conveys Jesus’ message. The New American Standard Version puts it best: “The Pharisee stood and was praying *thus to himself*.”

In fact, the pharisee was so content with himself, he so thoroughly trusted himself, and was so “not like other people,” that he had become his own god. “The prayer of the pharisee didn’t even make it to the ceiling, because it wasn’t aimed in that direction.”² Whereas, for the tax collector, naming his sin openly before the Lord brought him without pretense before God, to be forgiven and reconciled.

In our time, we fall somewhere between these two characters. We tend to explain our sins away so that we can come before God without bowing and scraping, because we’re not comfortable humbling ourselves before *anyone*. Yet, our tendency to rationalize and minimize sin impedes our experiencing God’s mercy. After all, who needs God when we are so efficient at reasoning our way out of our own sinfulness?³ Perhaps we’re not as unlike the pharisee as we might wish to be.

Not only do we tend to blow off our sins, but how often do we judge those who are lower down on the cultural totem pole as irresponsible and guilty of their own misery? We don’t want to be taxed to pay for their health care, housing, or feeding when they’re out there spending money on god-only-knows-what. Why should what we’ve worked hard for be shared with those we consider lazy and unworthy? To justify our lack of “faith, hope and charity,” we trot out examples of people who really do want to live off others, and blame all under-served people for the indolence of a few. We fail to remember that all *we* have is provided for us by God—and that we gladly take His handouts.

Worse still, we feel God owes us His attention to our needs, that we deserve His love and grace because we are better than others and keep—or *think* we keep—the Commandments and Jesus’ teachings. We utter “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” far too easily. Whereas “Forgive us our debts,” points to that which we owe God and owe others, implying there is something to forgive, and that we do fall short. Of course, we all fall short. Daily.

This morning, here in the presence of God, we feel secure because we believe God is ever loving, ever forgiving, always ready to restore us. And we *are* correct in that. Jesus offered Himself for us—and for *everyone*—placing Himself between our sins and their punishment, in an act of self-sacrificial love.

And yet, we cannot come before God secure in our own righteousness. As we say in the Rite I liturgy’s Prayer of Humble Access: “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.” God approves of the wretched tax gatherer over the self-righteous pharisee because the tax collector admits his faults. And in recognizing his own sin, he also recognizes God’s merciful nature. Jesus says the tax collector went home “justified”—a word that means “was made righteous.” He did not achieve justification through his repentance and humility, but only through God, who alone can justify, or “make righteous,” those who come to Him.⁴

St. Paul—*formerly* a pharisee—understood this, too. As he approaches his imminent martyrdom, Paul says he is being poured out like a drink unceremoniously dumped on the ground. What matters is that he has kept his faith through every imaginable hardship, suffering, and persecution. And so, upon his death, only the Lord, the righteous judge of all people, will bestow on Paul his heavenly reward, described as “a crown of righteousness”—which he could never have earned, merited, or paid for.

Before we leave the story of the pharisee and the publican, notice: All the tax collector does is confess his sinfulness and ask forgiveness. Nowhere does he tell God he will pay back what he’s illegally squeezed from the poor; promise to give away the money he’s unjustly kept for himself; or try to find a less exploitative, traitorous line of work.

Confession and repentance are both good, and we should do these daily. Yet, we demonstrate the *sincerity of our penitence* not only by admitting our sins and asking God’s mercy upon us, but we do so by our willingness to forgive others, and by loving and caring for those who are in need. Staying stuck in our humility without acting on it only keeps us as self-centered as the pharisee was in his pride. We are to use our self-emptying to reach out to others, and to do things for God.

Our reading from the Wisdom of Sirach today encourages those of us who have been saved and forgiven to “Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford. For the Lord ... will repay you sevenfold. Do not offer him a bribe [that is, don’t try bargaining with God], for he will not accept it and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality. He will not show partiality to the poor; but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.” Unless we allow ourselves to be filled with Christ’s love, *our love* isn’t up to the task of giving selflessly to God and to others. But with God’s love, we can be generous with every part of ourselves and our lives.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, You emptied Yourself of Your glory, power, and dominion that You might become one with us in love and sacrifice. Give us grace as we journey forward, not only to confess our sinfulness before You and seek Your mercy, but in response, to generously share of our time, treasure, and talents in ways that will continue to build Your kingdom of light and peace. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Anthony F. M. Clavier, “Are We Like the Righteous Man?” 27 October 2013, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/are-we-like-the-righteous-man-proper-25-c-2013/) <
https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/are-we-like-the-righteous-man-proper-25-c-2013/> 17 October 2022. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, “Year C: After Pentecost,” Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) pp.98-99.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*