October 27, 2013 – 23rd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25)

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The parable in today's Gospel always makes me feel very smug and good about myself. I'm pretty humble, right. Therefore, I will be considered righteous rather than those people who are pompous about their faith practices – those who pray ostentatiously and sneer at others who are less pious than they are.

But wait, isn't that kind of humility just its own form of pomposity? In my abject humility, am I not being just as proud of my form of religiosity as the Pharisee in this story? That seems to be something of a Catch 22. What are we supposed to do here?

As with some of the other parables in Luke's Gospel, Jesus sets the scene by describing specifically to whom he is aiming his message. In this case, his audience is undoubtedly a group of devout Jews, and probably Pharisees themselves. Whoever they were, they were pretty confident in their own righteousness, even to the point of looking on others with contempt.

The word for contempt here is *exoutheneo*, which is a really strong word. Luke uses it only two other times in his writings. Once is when Jesus is being tormented by Herod and his soldiers, prior to his crucifixion. The sense of contempt is there, but there's also a sense of being thought of as nothing. The King James translation has it as, "…they set him at naught and mocked him." The other time Luke uses it is in Acts where Peter is describing Jesus as the stone which the builders rejected.

So this word, *exoutheneo*, means to completely nullify someone's whole existence, to disregard and reject any worth they might possibly have. To deny their very humanity. As I said, it's a very strong word, and not a nice one at all.

How often, in the news or on the web, have we heard people treating others with just that kind of dismissive, ridiculing, contempt? Teachers have been called greedy for just wanting to keep their benefits and most of their pay. Native Americans are called moochers for wanting the United States to live up their end of legally binding treaties and provide the services they promised. Or, conversely, they're called selfish and grasping because on those reservations with casinos, some tribes have found a way to make money and make up for the US's default.

Single mothers are called loose for having a child without a father in the picture, and then called entitled for wanting to get enough extra money to feed those same kids or medical insurance to keep them healthy. And heaven forbid they should consider getting an abortion. Then they're baby-killers, and never mind the fact that those same babies are at risk for starving because food stamps have been cut. Students are called spoiled because they don't want to be paying on their student loans until they're 50, but they know they have to get that degree if they want to chase down the ever more elusive American dream.

Name calling. Blame. Contempt. These are the people whom Jesus is addressing with his parable. So let's take a look at the two characters in this little drama. The first one Jesus identifies as a Pharisee.

Pharisees were interesting cats. They're often portrayed in the Gospels as the bad guys. They're called a brood of vipers, and hypocrites, by Jesus and John the Baptist. They're often held up as models of pious rectitude, as in this story, and not in a good way. And yet, Jesus debated with them and went to dinner at their houses, and even counted some of them as disciples and friends.

And if this Pharisee had only kept his mouth shut, nothing about his actions showed him to be anything but devout and God-fearing. But he DIDN'T keep his mouth shut. His prayer showed him to be pretty full of himself. He describes to God his spiritual activity, as if God needed a blow-by-blow account of his piety, and he crosses the line by thanking God for not making him a miserable wretch like, to choose an example perfectly at random, that tax collector over there.

That's where he loses his credibility. All of his actions, the praying and the tithing and the fasting, are good things to do. Haven't I been telling you all to tithe almost every week for the past two months? But when he started to compare his actions to someone else's, those actions became no longer about God. They became about him.

Then we have the tax collector. Like "Pharisee," "tax collector" is a code word for the worst kind of despicable sinner. As a matter of fact, more often than not, the term "tax collector" is paired with the term "sinner," like they're joined at the hip. The Pharisees are often complaining that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, or sinners and tax collectors. They're collective nouns for society's unredeemable nasties. Unredeemable, that is, until Jesus comes along and eats with them and invites them to become disciples, and, in short, treats them like human beings.

This particular tax collector seems to be pretty aware of his own sinfulness. He creeps into a corner of the Temple and, not even daring to look up to heaven, utters an anguished cry to God to be forgiven even though he's a terrible sinner and he knows it. And he ends up being the one who is truly righteous before God, not the Pharisee.

As I said in the beginning, this parable can make us feel pretty smug and proud of ourselves in our great humility. But that's a trap. The parable isn't about humility per se. This parable is about God. The Pharisee didn't really do anything wrong, and in terms of Jewish religious practice of the day; in fact, he did a lot right. And the tax collector, although humble and repentant, was still a tax collector and a collaborator with Rome. He may have turned in his green eyeshade and ledgers that very day, but the parable doesn't say anything about it because it doesn't really matter.

What matters is God. What matters is our focus. Are we focusing on God or on ourselves? Do we understand that only God can make us righteous through his grace, or do we sometimes rely a bit too much on our own achievements and our own goodness? To God, we are all equally under judgment BUT we are all also equally beloved.

What the tax collector did that sent him home justified (which is another word for righteous or being right with God) is focus on God. "God have mercy on me! I know I can't do it myself, and I want to be right with you!" And God, whose property is always to have mercy, heard him. Oh, he undoubtedly heard the Pharisee, too, but I can imagine him saying, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, all well and good, but what about ME? Where do I come into the picture, other than apparently having given you the nice end of the lollipop?"

What about God? Where is he in your lives? Is he the focus of your actions? When you pray, is God at the center of the prayer, or merely at the beginning? When you give to the church, are you giving to God out of your immense gratitude for all he gives you or out of some other obligation? When you help others, are you seeing Christ in their faces and helping them because of that, or because it's "the right thing to do?"

God doesn't want perfect, or else he wouldn't be interested in a tax collector. God doesn't want perfect, he wants us. He wants us to love him with all of our hearts and our souls and our strength and our minds. And he wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, as someone who is equally valuable, equally human, and equally loved by God.

To do that, we have to stop dividing people into them and us. We have to stop seeing people who are different from us in some way as "other." We need to break down or reach over any barriers that exist between us and just love each other as beloved children of God. And we need to trust in God's grace and mercy to save us, and not anything we ourselves can do.

God be merciful to us sinners!

Amen.