

Sermon: October 27, 2019- Righteous and Justified (*Luke 18: 9-14*)

Two men went to the temple to pray. One a Pharisee, stood by himself, yet in prominent place in the temple where others would have gathered to pray and he spoke aloud, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." This prayer, at least to my ear, sounds a tad self righteous and it causes me, and maybe even you to instantly think okay, that is not the prayer, that I should make a habit of praying. "Dear God here all the things that I am really good at, things that I do to make my life and the life of those around me better."

Now the tax collector that this pharisee speaks of, is the other man that Jesus points out, he, unlike the pharisee, does not stand in a populated location, in fact he stood far off, meaning away from others in the temple that day and his prayers sounds different. As he begins to pray, he beats his chest and says, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus then says, "this man, (meaning this chest beating tax collector,) went home justified rather than the other." Jesus then continues by adding, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

It seems that we have before us today a rather easy passage from Luke. The message of this passage is straightforward and shouldn't need much interpretation. Jesus says of the two one of these men goes home justified. It should not come as a surprise to us that its not the Pharisee that Jesus lifts up, but instead the tax collector and the moral of the story seems to be, " Do not pray like the pharisee, with arrogance and righteousness, instead pray humbly like the tax collector and you will be justified. Amen.....well not quite.

I am sorry if you thought you might get to have a cup of coffee sooner than normal this morning, but there is just one little.... or big problem that needs to be mentioned. The pharisees prayer, isn't actually wrong. Though the words he utter are obnoxious the truth is the Pharisee is right, he is not a thief, he is not a rouge or an adulterer, he is not a tax collector, who by all accounts were actually quite despised people, not because of who they were, but because of what they were doing; they were taxing their fellow Jews, to enable military occupation. Effectively the tax collectors enable Israel to remain under the heavy foot of Rome. So, the Pharisee is right, he is not like those other people and I will take this a step further and add that not only is the pharisee right, but he is also righteous, not just self righteous, but actually righteous. According the Bible to be righteous is to follow the laws of God; the Laws of Israel and the pharisee follows those laws to a T. He fasts for the prescribed amount of the time and gives 10% of his income, a Tithe, to the temple.

But the tax collector isn't wrong either, he is indeed a sinner. There are many definitions of what it means to sin, but the one I have often found the most meaningful is to say that a sin is anything that we do, that diminishes our relationship with others and with God. This tax

collector is then undeniably guilty of the sin he names because his line of work doesn't just diminish his relationship with his community, it completely destroys it and so he is absolutely right, he is a sinner, and he rightfully begs for God's mercy in his wrong doing. But I also noted in my reading of the text that the author suggests that the Tax collector stands at distance, away from the other people gathered to pray; this makes him sound incredibly humble, but realistically its not humility that keeps him at a distance, its fear. He is afraid to be too close to all the people that he effectively has made a living stealing from. On top of that there is no pledge to change, nor plan of action to mend his sinful way, he simply asks for mercy.

By all accounts this not a nice man. Knowing that both of these men are technically right in their prayers to God, presents a problem for us. Because Jesus picks one of them and says that he goes to his home justified, while the other does not. Which means that Jesus suggests that one who follows the law, the one that does everything righteously, is not justified, but that the one who is not righteous, the one who has destroyed his relationship with his community and with God, the one who names himself to be a sinner, and the one who doesn't seem to pledge a change, is. Can you see the problem? The problem is it sounds absolutely crazy.

So why? That's the question we need to ask, why is tax collector justified, and why is the righteous law abiding pharisee, regardless of how obnoxious he is, not? The other characters in our account today offer us a clue, as to what Jesus was getting at with this parable. We haven't talked about them yet, but they were introduced to us with the first words of the text. The passage began today with the words, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Those some, whoever they might be, are who Jesus spoke to are who Jesus intended this message for; those some are who Jesus continues to speak to today.

I am just going to jump straight to the answer today, the tax collector is justified, because he recognizes the need he has for God in his life. He may not be a good man, he may indeed be a sinner, but he recognizes that he needs God's grace and love and mercy and forgiveness in his life. He recognizes that everything that he has that truly has value, and no that's not the money he has stolen from his neighbours, but everything of true value, life itself every breath he takes, is a gift from God. He knows that without God's mercy he is nothing, he lost and absolutely alone; he recognizes that God does love and care for him.

The pharisee and the some to which Jesus speaks, do not notice God's grace in their lives and thus are not justified. This pharisee is so sure of his righteousness, so sure of his holiness, so sure of his purity, that he doesn't acknowledge a need for God. He doesn't need God, because he has everything figured out already. He is so righteous that he knows that all those others are not as good as him. The pharisee may be honest about his work and his

righteousness, but he has lost his way by seeing himself as better than his neighbour; he sets himself apart from this other man, and in so doing refuses to acknowledge God's love at work in both of their lives; he feels somehow entitled to God's love in his life. But Jesus says he is not justified, because he cannot acknowledge God, nor can he see God at work in the lives of the others that he names.

But there is a bit a trap once we notice why the Tax collector is justified and the Pharisee is not and the trap is to then read the passage in this way, "A Self-Righteous Pharisee says his prayers in the temple. He is prideful and self-congratulatory, entitled. A Tax collector also says his prayers, but, unlike the Pharisee, he is humble. God hears the prayers of the humble tax collector, and does not listen to the self-righteous Pharisee. The moral of the story is: be humble like the Tax Collector. The Tax Collector has discovered the secret—he has found the way to win approval in the eyes of God: humility! Be like the Tax Collector and you too will be able to say, Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee!

Friends, this parable is not about winning God's love. It's not about pointing out who God loves more. It's not about being the perfect human being so that we can be righteous and it's not about being so humble that you can then say look at how humble I am, thank God I am not like those who are not humble; for God's love is not something we are entitled to because we did something. Instead Justification in this parable, according to Jesus, is about recognizing the presence and the love of God in your life and the difference that presence and love and mercy and forgiveness can and does make. It's about knowing that yes we work hard in what we do, but without the grace of God we are nothing and it's about learning that God does not have favourites; that God will grant one more love and the other more forgiveness, all of us sinners and all of us saints are loved equally. To be justified means that you do not presume that what you have is by your own hand; but to note the love of God in your life.

Last Sunday night Steph and I went to see one of my all-time favourite musicians. He is an American folk singer by the name of Martin Sexton. He has what I would consider to be the voice of an angel. His tone and sound are incredibly pure. He can sing in multiple octaves and can hit the highest of highs and lowest of lows sometimes all in one breath. And his guitar sings. I have heard people describe how musicians can make their instruments sing, he could do it. His guitar was like an extension of himself. I had never seen Martin live before, but the man oozes talent, he is so incredibly gifted; his presence on the stage is commanding. But what I found absolutely amazing, was that he began his concert by singing a song that said, "There but for the grace of God go I." He listed all the things he was thankful for, his voice, his talent, his ability to play in St. Albert, Alberta; not to say oh look at me, but simply to say, there but for the

grace of God go I.” He quite publicly and meaningfully said all of this, his music us being together, the air we breath was and is a gift of God.”

I would like to suggest that what Jesus is saying in this parable to a group of some that trust in themselves and are entitled and self righteous, and to all of us that dabble in a little self righteousness and entitlement from time to time, that by the grace of God, go us all. That we have no right to say, I did all this myself and why can that person not, because you and that person share the same thing that matter which is the gift of life and only by the grace of God do, we share that tremendous gift. May we all learn to recognize the grace of God in all that we are and in all that we do and may we know that the love God has for our neighbours, of all sorts and shapes, is the same love God has for us; no more, no less, no different. God’s love is not earned, it is freely given, so let s rejoice in that gift. Amen.