

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In 1979, my family spent a year in a little town in Wisconsin called Chetek – it was a farming town near Eau Claire, in the southwestern corner of the state. My dad was studying to be a Lutheran pastor, and was sent to Wisconsin to complete his “internship year” as a third year student at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Some of my earliest memories are of moving into this giant old Victorian farmhouse, the “parsonage” right next to the town’s sizeable Lutheran church – the several staircases, high ceilings, and large attic were all settings for my four-year-old imagination as I explored this creaky old house.

My parents had both grown up in church, my dad’s family being Methodist – but my mom was a Lutheran, and so he converted, as sometimes happens, for love. In college, he studied mathematics, but – after a profound spiritual encounter at a Billy Graham crusade, in which my parents both responded to the evangelical fervor, he began to feel a call to a vocation as a minister and missionary. He was, at the time, all of 25 years old – and, as seminarians (and new seminary graduates) can sometimes be, he was rather headstrong and – perhaps, sometimes, a bit overzealous.

Once, when preaching early-on in his internship year, still inspired by that mountaintop Evangelistic Crusade conversion experience, he gave an invitation to those in the congregation who wished to come forward, pray with him, and give their life to the Lord. A real, proper, tent-meeting-style altar call, right there in this small-town, middle class, Lutheran church.

After the service, he received a tongue-lashing not only from the senior pastor, but also at least one long-time, stalwart member of the congregation. As my dad tells it, this was the gist of the feedback he received:

“Why do you keep talking about salvation? I don’t need to be saved. I’ve lived a pretty good life. I’ve worked hard and raised a family. I’ve worked hard for this church, too. Go save somebody else.”

In his youthful evangelistic excitement he couldn’t possibly have understood how a call to repentance and salvation might unintentionally offend members of a congregation – after all, I’m sure he thought, what place could be more receptive to an offer of the transformative grace of Jesus than a church?

“I don’t need to be saved – go save somebody else.”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that the Pharisee goes up to the Temple to pray. And, actually, by all regular metrics, this Pharisee is right – he is a good guy. Jewish men were all required to fast a couple of times per year – on the Day of Atonement, at very least, and perhaps one or two other days. But a Pharisee’s fasts were twice-weekly, accompanied by intensive prayer and intercession for his people. He is spiritually dedicated, but also invested in pragmatic ways too – he gives generously to the upkeep of the temple, tithing ten percent of all his wealth and income. Yes, he IS a good person, and he knows he is doing what he should be doing. “Thank God,” he says, “that I’m not like these other people – cheats, sinners, tax collectors – human scum.”

Meanwhile, Jesus directs our attention to the other man, standing far off. He “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner!’” He beats his breast – he describes himself as a SINNER.

And he asks for mercy.

And his prayer is heard.

Of course, the danger here is for us to look at these two – especially with our baked-in assumptions about Pharisees from years and years of Sunday School classes – and say to ourselves, “THANK GOD I’m not like that horrible Pharisee.” Which, of course, just puts us right in his place.

This story Jesus tells us today is really not about the Pharisee or the tax collector – he’s telling it to us. “Jesus told this parable,” Luke tells us, “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

Oof. Guilty.

Aren’t we all the Pharisee, sometimes, really? Aren’t we all, at times, caught up in some amount of self-satisfaction? Perhaps especially when we are doing really well? In some ways this is a story of privilege: the Pharisee, through his success and study and diligence, is able to look at himself and see his accomplishments, his prestige, his intelligence – and think, “so, God, I’m doing okay here, right?”

The tax collector, overtaken by grief at his own sin, who has nothing else to hold onto at that moment but God: he has no righteousness within himself on which to build any kind of spiritual arrogance. He throws himself on God’s mercy, at that moment, fully.

A friend of mine used to tell a funny story about his own years of ministry as a priest: when he was a young curate, his boss, the rector, was new in his church, and making the rounds of parishioners – getting to know the members of the church. One, in particular, hadn't been to church in some time – and so the rector inquired as to why this might be. "I don't go there anymore," the man said. "there are just too many hypocrites." To which, the rector replied, "Oh don't worry about that. There are still plenty of seats for many more. Come back and join the rest of us."

I think Jesus knows we are too often the Pharisee in this story – after all, the Pharisee exhibits much good in his life, but also has unknowingly succumbed to very human tendencies – of pride, of ego, of self-satisfaction, of thinking...well, at least I'm not as bad as THAT guy. One commentator I consulted this week said it this way – that the Pharisee "glances at God and contemplates himself." <sup>1</sup>

As we learn how to pray – as we learn to approach God without focusing on ourselves, a lifetime project – we find the mercy and love that we – Pharisee and tax collector alike, so very much need.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> International Bible Commentary, F. F. Bruce, ed. P. 1218.