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Emanuel's Lutheran Church • Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA  
October 24, 2010 • 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost (C)

*Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22*  
*Psalm 84:1-7*  
*2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18*  
*Luke 18:9-14*

In which character could you see or hear yourself and your faith most, in today's gospel? Frankly, that seems like a hard choice to me. I bet that we've all heard this story before – we know that the tax collector comes out looking pretty good in Jesus' eyes. We know that Jesus got in trouble for hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. It seems natural to wish that maybe we were the folks whom Jesus would have wanted to be around.

Yet tax collectors at the time were viewed by society as rotten, oppressive crooks. Israel was occupied territory, subjected to the rule of the Roman empire. Tax collectors were the henchmen who helped the empire stay rich and in control. They collected money, which was a higher amount than the people found helpful. And they tried to make a profit at the same time, bribing and extorting to get as much as they could. They were jerks with enough power and authority to make everyone's economic life worse. Tax collectors were universally hated for what they did and how they treated others. Today our society might think similarly of drug dealers who get minors hooked or serial sex offenders who threaten their victims into silence.

For us, the Pharisees are only the establishment guys who gave Jesus a hard time. But they were wonderful compared with the slime of tax collectors! They were shining pillars of the community. They sought to live their faith and were known to care for those in need. In the face of an oppressive government, Pharisees were building stronger Jewish traditions and community.

Yet the prayers of these two are striking – and totally opposite of what listeners would expect. The Pharisee, who everyone would have thought had a more perfect relationship with God, or a more perfect prayer life – expressed great self-satisfaction along with utter disdain for the people around him. And the tax collector? He may have acted in despicable ways, but he was willing to admit his brokenness and failings.

## **Guilty as Charged**

This parable is ultimately a trick. Jesus told it so that we listeners are forced to face the dark side of ourselves. We quickly judge the Pharisee as being a self-centered, self-righteous snot. We quickly find ourselves doing exactly what we accuse of someone else.

As we approach election day, we see television reminders all the time, which demonstrate the kind of self-righteousness that we humans are capable of. The

language is overstated, dramatic language of self-righteous judgment. The culture surrounding our society's electoral process seems to make that triumphalistic language a requirement for survival. It's easy to denounce that as a function of our secular society, but I think it's more about us as humans, in general.

In our bad times, we have similarly ridiculous levels on the self-righteous meter in the church. On the synod and national levels of the ELCA, many of our leaders have been caught up in self-righteous judgment over issues of how we speak faithfully of gay or lesbians, and how they fit into church life. This has resulted in only wimpy attempts at healthy, faithful discussion about the theological and scriptural issues. Instead, along the way people in different places have felt unwelcome in Christ's church – which last I checked was for all sinners. Relationships have been broken. People on all sides have acted self-righteously, including those who hold more extreme viewpoints – and including people like me, who are most frustrated by the brokenness and twisted relationships revealed in it all. In the right mood, I am glad to rant, in self-righteous indignation, about our inability to live as the church together.

One of the results of our self-righteous behavior is that some congregations are choosing to leave the ELCA. As I mentioned in the announcements, today our friends at Brighton Heights Lutheran are taking their (what I believe is their) second

and final vote about whether to join the newly-formed denomination, the North American Lutheran Church. Before them, they have official amendments to the constitution that make the change. This move is grounded in the conflict within the ELCA regarding sexuality.

Before anyone begins to feel too comfortable with themselves or with our congregation, think again. Emanuel's has certainly experienced these kinds of self-righteous divisions over the years. The most recent one, last fall, was our conflict over three pews. Whether or not you were involved personally, all our relationships in the congregation were impacted. I suspect that God's heart broke with the self-righteousness that appeared in all of us. I know that it was just the last of a series of times of division, too.

## **The Good News**

God knew this all when humanity was created though. God continues to know all about each of us now. Whether we are slime-balls or do-gooders, we are far from perfect. As individuals and as groups, we wrestle with sin in our lives – whether it's pride or envy, greed or sloth, addiction or lust. Yet God has reached out to us, even with our weaknesses and failings. Our sins don't change the love given to us through Jesus Christ. We don't need to keep track of either the good that we do, in

order to be sure that we get full credit. There's no need to compare ourselves with one another either, for that does not give us any idea of what God really thinks.

We have already been given any prize that we could win! In Christ, we have received God's generous blessing of grace for a full life, now and ever more. This gift's effectiveness and promise only depends on whether we have chosen to receive it. No report cards or performance reviews are involved. No "keeping up with the Joneses" is required.

Jesus shifts our focus to what's really important. If we want to get a real measure of our faith, we don't look to ourselves at all. The epitome of faith, the tallest tower of faithfulness possible, is found in Jesus Christ. Our little mustard seed faith only makes sense amid his faith and life, his death and resurrection. Our faith, our goodness and humility, our lives of witness and service, are all gifts from the Holy Spirit.

We are in today's parable, because it tells the good news of God's love for all people. It shows the incredibly generous grace that we all are given, at baptism and for the rest of our lives. Pharisee and tax collector, we're in it together: blessed with love, one and all. Amen.