**Luke 18:9-14** March 1, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Ash Wednesday

*Luke 18:9To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ 13But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ 14I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

**Taking An Honest Look**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Nobody could compare to this man. Some went through life plodding along, doing what they could day by day. They were light years behind him and may as well have just given up. Others tried to keep up, but they just didn’t have what it takes, not like him. He had the discipline, the focus. He had the hunger in the stomach and the fire in the belly. No one could catch him! When he went out to the garden and he picked ten strawberries, he made sure one went to God and if he picked 120 strawberries, he made sure 12 went to God. He counted. Some people worshiped for an hour or two once a week. He did that, sure. But every Thursday and Monday he also fasted, he ate no food from sunup to sundown. This was only the beginning. Everything he did in life, whether at home or in the street, at work or in the garden, on the path or in the store, was governed by God’s rules. And he followed them. And if he were to miss something somewhere, he could be pretty sure he was ahead of 99.9% of people.

There is that old joke about two farmers in the field who notice a bull out of his pen. One starts running for the fence a full quarter mile away and the other guy says, “You don’t really think we can outrun that bull, do you?” And the first says, “I don’t have to, I just have to outrun you!” And if the Pharisee ever had the least little doubt about his own righteousness—and he didn’t—all he had to do was do what he did on that day in the temple: look around—look around at all the spiritual underachievers and slackers. And he would know none could compare to him.

Few could compare to the other guy either. He had gotten a lucrative job as a tax collector. As with a few lucrative jobs, it involved some… unethical behavior. The Roman government contracted out tax collecting for a large area, like a congressional district. Then that person would auction off tax collection for each precinct. The local guys , like the tax collector of this parable had to give $X.xx to his boss. Whatever he collected over that was his pay. The tax collector wasn’t the mafia kingpin, he was the mafia collection agency. “That bill you have? Well, it would be a shame if something happened to this nice shop of yours…” Hearing the kids play outside, “And I hope none of your children ever gets lost on the way home from school…” And he would look them in the eye, daring them to cross him. That is why in the language of the New Testament tax collectors were lumped with sinners. The fabric of their life was sewn together by hard-core greed.

In Jesus’ parable, one lived for himself, claiming God was the reason. The other lived for himself, like a leach off the lifeblood of others. The truth of the matter is that, before God, they were on equal footing. Before God, both were disgusting. God judges actions *and* hearts. Both their hearts were filthy.

We all find a home in this parable. We all have instincts that tend to run in one of these two directions, either tax collector or Pharisee. If your instinct is to challenge and rebel against the laws of God and man, you are that tax collector. You look others in the eye and say, “You have no right to tell me anything, to run my life.” Or maybe, like the Pharisee, you are the dutiful, obedient citizen whose instinct is not rebellion but compliance. You don’t understand why people don’t get it. You know where the blame lies, and you can find plenty in just about everyone else, in the big things (their criminality) and the little things (not using their blinkers).

But here is the truth about the tax collector: a muddy pig is a pig. And here is the truth about the Pharisee: a washed-up pig is still a pig. And whatever we might look like to the world around us, good or bad, God looks into our hearts and he sees what we *really* are: sinners. His word tells us that by nature we are spiritually dead (Eph 2:1). His word tells us that *“There is no one righteous, no not one”* (Rom 3:10) His word tells us that *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”* (Rom 3:23) Even to the believer, God’s word says, *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves”* (1 John 1:8). In one of the more penetrating statements about human nature, the Lord declares that *“every inclination of [man’s] heart is evil”* (Gen 8:21). *Every inclination!* As soon as we start to think, sin is warping and infecting our thoughts. And when we are honest, we know it.

Some things in the kingdom of this world are completely different from the way things they are in God’s world. But some things are very much the same in both God’s kingdom and in this world. Here is one of them – a problem can be solved only when it is identified and dealt with. That is what the tax collector did when he said, ***“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”*** The problem was his sin. And he knew he wouldn’t get anywhere until he had dealt with that problem.

When you remember things in your life, how vividly do you remember them? There are some people, when they think about the dumb sinful things in their past, it becomes not just an exercise of the mind but also the body. I am sure there is some psychological designation for this. When such a person remembers being cruel to someone, he closes eyes in disgust of his own actions. His fists and jaw clench, maybe he even starts to pound his fists together, reliving the moment he wishes he could erase from the unwritten biography of his life. Do you know anyone like that? ***“The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast”*** When he finally understood it was useless to un-live his life, Jesus tells us that he did the only thing that could possibly have saved him. He stopped re-living that moment, stopped trying to make up for that moment, and in despair threw himself on God’s mercy saying, ***“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*** He named himself what he was: a sinner. And he looked for help in the only place he could find it. Jesus said, ***“I tell you that this man went home justified before God. For he who humbles himself will be exalted.”***

And had the Pharisee done the same thing, had he too realized the worthlessness of his deeds and flung himself on God’s mercy, there would have been two justified sinners walking home that day.

This parable must have made one of Jesus’ disciples feel a little bit weird. Because, you see, one of his Twelve had really been a tax collector; his name was Matthew. This parable is not just a story. It is was really happens. And maybe when Jesus told this parable, maybe he glanced over at Matthew and gave him a smile. And even if he didn’t Matthew knew the truth of it, that yes, even the worst of sinners are justified by God’s merciful forgiveness.

In the Christian church, we know that we are freely justified. But justification was not free. Oh, it was free to us. But it cost Jesus dearly. That is why we have the season of Lent. We spend this season, especially the coming five Wednesdays, remembering the great sacrifice Jesus made for us. We watch Jesus go to Gethsemane, to the courtroom, to the public execution on Golgotha. We remind ourselves of the great things Jesus has done, and we are assured that our sins have been paid for. We leave all the filth of our sin with our Savior in whose righteousness it is swallowed up, and we can tonight leave this house of worship justified. Amen.