**Luke 18:9-14** February 17, 2021

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.’ 13“But 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.’*

*14“I 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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Optimist, pessimist, realist: which are you? You can take the old tried and true half glass of water test: half-full or half-empty? Recently, someone suggested another test: A pessimist, an optimist and a realist are sailing a sailboat. The pessimist complains about the wind, the optimist is sure the wind will change for the better, the realist adjusts the sail. Which are you?

Most of us like to think of ourselves as realists. Maybe a few like to think of themselves as optimists, but I think most of us want to be realists: “I see things the way they are. I deal with the facts and work with them.” My personal opinion is that most of us are less realistic than we like to imagine—including myself.

We know realism is important. For example, let’s say you are on the first manned space mission to Mars. Do you want to be surrounded by pessimists, optimists or realists? Strapped in for the countdown, do you want pessimistic mission control people to come in over the headset and say, “This probably won’t work, but let’s give it a shot;” or optimists who spout off, “I can’t imagine why this wouldn’t work. Right?” or realists who say, “This will work because we have done A, B, C, D and the whole rest of the alphabet to prove it.” I want the realist, or I’m not in that rocket seat.

How do you stand with God? Jesus, this evening, confronts us with reality. He insists that we be realists. The stakes are high. Optimism will fall short. Pessimism will end in despair. In his parable, he tells us how we *really* stand with God.

**Ash Wednesday: A Day for Realism**

Jesus tells us a story. It’s not a real event, but it could be. At its core is spiritual truth, a truth that can perhaps be better illustrated than described. That’s what a parable is.

In this parable are two men. If you are familiar with your Bible, you know these men. Time and again you have rubbed shoulders with Pharisees and tax collectors. But since most of us probably only know the cardboard cut-out versions, it is good for us to set aside some assumptions.

The Pharisees really *were* the virtuous people of their day. You would have wanted one of them as your neighbor. A Pharisee doesn’t curse, drinks only in strict moderation, no loud music. He wouldn’t dream of letting his dog do his business in your lawn. He helps people in need, goes to church. Rumor is he’s never even had a traffic ticket. Now, he may not be the most pleasant person to talk to—a little full of himself, if you know what I mean—but if your version of a good neighbor is one who leaves you alone, helps in a pinch, and keeps the property values up, he is your man. Societies are stronger for people like these Pharisees.

On the other hand you have the tax collector, a parasite, a blight on society. The Jewish tax collector of 30AD wasn’t a tax collector for a Jewish state. Instead he did business with foreign totalitarian rulers. He got in tight with them to oppress and extort his own kith and kin. They’d sell their own mothers down the river. Tax collectors were not generally, but totally assumed to be the scum of the earth. By way of example, Jewish courts *prohibited* tax collectors from testifying because they were so dishonest.

So there you have complete opposites: the Pharisee and tax collector. Everyone knew and agreed who had the corner on morality between these two. That’s the reality behind this parable.

Who is going to be right with God? Who is going to get into heaven?

The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, will most certainly not. He is full of loveless thoughts toward other people, even as he imagines himself somehow in God’s confidence. ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.”***  Then he adds, ***“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”*** Which is to say, *“Look! I do even more good than your law requires, God!”*

We imagine that this Pharisee’s sin is pride. And it is, but probably not in the way we think it is. Here is the trap. It is so easy for us to think, “If this Pharisee had just done all the good stuff: kept going to church, kept helping the poor, kept on being a decent man, and just been a lot more humble about it, he would have been good with God.” He would not have been!

How often have you heard people say, “I try to do what is right”? It’s the Pharisee speaking. It is a person who thinks they are coming to God with the good stuff in hand. They feel they have avoided the arrogance pride of this Pharisee. But he (or she) is still clutching his decency, his respectability, his church attendance, his social justice credentials, and laying it on the altar in front of God sayning, “Look God, I’m really a pretty good Joe.”

The core pride problem with this man isn’t whether he is being proud or not about his good deeds, it’s that he is even talking about his good deeds. He actually thinks that he can be good enough to be acceptable before God! That’s an impossibility!

On the other hand we have the tax collector. He is the dictionary definition of humility: ***“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.’”***

His “virtue” (if I may call it that) is that he realizes he has no virtue to lay before God as compensation for who he has been. Here too, we can easily misunderstand. We might think that if this tax collector just has a change of heart and does things differently, is more fair about his tax computations, that then he will find his way into heaven. But if that is what we think the secret is, then we have simply made him into another Pharisee, with confidence in his works.

In Jesus’ parable, the tax collector’s “virtue” is not that he is going to do better in the future. It is found in the averted eye, the fist clenched in feelings of self-defeat and frustration over his many faults, and the cry, ***“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*** He has no hope in his good works.

That cry is so important! Praying for God’s mercy does not lay claim to God’s favor because of anything you have done in the past, are doing in the present, or will do in the future. This God-pleasing cry asks only, *only, only* that which you and I do not deserve: God’s mercy in the forgiveness Christ Jesus won for us.

So we rightly identify pride as the problem, and humility as the solution. But it bears repeating that our human nature likes to suggest that as long as we are basically humble, doing nice things, trying to help others, etc., then all is well between us and God

The tax collector’s justification didn’t consist in being a humble do-gooder, but in completely abandoning the idea that any amount, any type of do-gooding could do anything to satisfy God.

This is the realism of the day called Ash Wednesday.

This exclusive trust in God’s mercy is the main point of this parable. Jesus brings it out in his summary: ***“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.”*** Not justified when he got home and started to live a better life. Not justified when he had made up for his past mistakes. Justified right then and there as he walked out of God’s house by God’s undeserved mercy and love.

On this Ash Wednesday, as we begin to walk the road with Jesus to his cross, we begin with tax collector’s confession, saying only, ***“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*** Now hear Jesus tell you, *“Go home justified before God.”* Amen.