

First Reading: Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22

Psalm: Psalm 84:1-7

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

## **Gospel: Luke 18:9-14**

9[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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Compared to some of the parables we’ve encountered in the last few months, today’s seems pretty straight forward - be humble.

But as pastor and theologian Debie Thomas writes in her commentary on the passage, “On its face, this is a very simple parable. It feels silly to interpret it when its message is so obvious. But here’s the trap, expressed as a prayer I am sorely tempted to pray in response: “Lord, I thank you that I am nothing like the obnoxious caricature of a human being who is the Pharisee in your story. Thank you that I have arrived at a point in

my faith journey where I am much more like the tax collector:  
self-aware, emotionally intelligent, mindful, cognizant, teachable,  
humble, and *woke*.”

Ugh - I guess it's not so simple after all. For the moment we claim ourselves as humble before God, as following God's way for us, we are no longer humble.

So, what are we to do with such a parable? How are we to hear a word of grace without getting stuck in this trap?

One of the things we often do when we read Jesus parables is to try to put ourselves in the story - am I the Pharisee or am I the tax collector? - and then once we've figured out where we think we are located in the story we interpret the parable accordingly. This is an important tool in unpacking scripture - to be able to put ourselves in various positions in the story, hearing it from a variety of perspectives. So, I wonder if, for today, instead of trying to

decide who we are in the story, we take ourselves out of the parable all together and allow ourselves to simply hear it.

By the time we encounter Jesus in today's Gospel he has been teaching and healing around the countryside. He's even foretold his own death and he's working really hard to help get the word out about the expansiveness of God's love and grace as much as he can. He's teaching about practices of faith and preparing people for the long, hard, countercultural work of those who trust in God's endless mercy. So when he notices that some see themselves as more worthy than others or as Luke puts it, "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt," he recognizes a way in which even people who desire to follow his teachings can lose sight of what he's trying to get across. And teaches them that God's mercy is wider, more radical, than they might ever imagine.

A friend of mine from seminary once began a sermon confessing, “about 70% of the time, I’m an atheist.”

She went on to explain that it’s not that she didn’t *claim* to believe in God - to profess a faith, to pray, to read and study scripture. It’s that despite these things, she still often believed she could save herself. She often forgot that no amount of good deeds - no amount of fasting or tithing - would make her more worthy in the eyes of God, more redeemable.

The issue isn’t that the Pharisee is fasting and tithing nor that he was coming to the temple to pray. It’s not about his specific practices. The issue with the Pharisee's exaltation of himself for not being like the tax collector is that, whether it’s conscious or not, he thinks he can make himself worthy before God all on his own. It clarifies that his practices of fasting and tithing are not practices he undertakes in order to deepen his faith, or to grow closer to God for the sake of faithful living and doing good for the

world beyond himself. Rather, these practices have become for the purpose of bolstering himself up, of feeling good about himself in opposition to others, of being able to claim a sort of righteousness over and against others. His preoccupation with how wonderful he is shifts the focus of his fasting and tithing to himself and away from God.

This can so easily happen to us. We make a life shift or take on a practice out of a deep love for or concern something and then, over time, we lose sight of how we started this practice in the first place and it morphs into something else entirely.

For example, it's like the person who became a vegetarian because they care deeply about climate change. But after a little while they're more caught up in their own judgements about those who don't make the decision to cut meat from their diet that they've lost sight of the reality that the point of this shift in their life was about their love for the planet in the first place.

Or perhaps it's like a person who identifies as white who has decided to only read books by female or queer authors of color because they wanted to expand their worldview and increase their compassion, only to now find themselves unable to appreciate the work of any white male ever. Their worldview may have expanded in some ways, but it has also shrunk.

Although unconventional to what we normally think of as a faith practice, these are both deeply faith-full practices to choose to take on. They're both grounded in a longing for something more for the world and for being a part of healing.

But here's the thing - I fully believe that this desire to do good, to live faithfully - even if it sometimes gets lost in the opposition or comparison to others - comes from a place of deep longing, a place of desiring that God's dream for our common life together will come to fruition. Longings for a different future than the one

the climate crisis makes us think is possible, for true racial justice, for an end to violence in our schools and on our streets. These are deeply faithful longings. They are good and true and pure. They hold on to hope that something else is possible. They are sacred.

I'd like to believe that the people to whom Jesus told this parable became the self-righteous people they were through forgetting that their practices, their piety, their (what is now) trust in themselves, originally started from a commitment to the larger good - from a longing they had for the world. From a humble place of trusting in God's mercy and a desire to tune into it more deeply. And yet somewhere along the way, that longing has taken a backseat to the practices themselves - and their original, humble beginning. Which makes me think that, perhaps, what Jesus wants for his hearers isn't simply to be more humble, but to let go of their self-righteous certainty and be able to remember the sacred longings in their hearts.

“Faith is not the clinging to a shrine but an endless pilgrimage of the heart,” writes Abraham Heschel. “Audacious longing, burning songs, daring thoughts . . . these are all a drive towards serving The One who rings our hearts like a bell” (*Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976], p. 174).

What do you long for? What practices have you set in place in your life to honor that humble longing? To ground you in the mercy that God alone can give?

I pray you may be re-grounded in that for which your heart longs. That you allow that longings and those practices to encourage your faithful living, deepen your relationships, and expand your humble reverence for all that God can do. May your heart ring like a bell.

Amen.