A Pharisee and a Tax Collector go into a Bar

Sunday, October 26, 2025 || Proper 25C || Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2Timothy 4-6, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14 || St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sunday, October 26, 2025 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Happy 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Happy last Sunday of October, Happy (almost) Halloween, and Happy final Sunday of Daylight Savings time! (We fall back next Sunday)

This is where we will dwell for a bit and suss out the planners from the take-it-as-it comes crowd. Not only do we turn the clocks back NEXT Sunday, but we begin hurdling toward the end of our liturgical year, when we bid the gospel of Luke a fond farewell and we pick up the stories of Jesus as found in the gospel of Matthew.

Luke is often my favorite gospel because of his focus on mercy, social justice and the inclusion of all. His gospel, in particular, invites the radical inclusion of everyone especially disenfranchised and marginalized or missed folks. Luke's gospel is accessible, challenging, and, over achiever Luke is credited with writing both this gospel and the book of Acts, each of which he aimed at a largely gentile audience.

This morning we are treated to a great example of his focus on an unchurched gentile audience -- often subjected to marginalization or social and economic isolation.

This morning's parable of the Pharisee and a tax collector may seem clear, at a first read or listen. We are offered a pharisee who seems to be doing things that our Lord would very much appreciate. He prioritizes his relationship with God. He fasts, to draw him deeper into his faith. He prays, as he is this morning, and he tithes – or donates 10% of his income to the temple. All great! We know that he studied scripture and by job description was learned and community minded. But this morning, we are invited to compare him – most ***un***favorably – to his tax collector counterpart.

The tax collector is probably outside the temple, prostrating himself, beating himself and humbly begging for God's mercy...and it is **this** unlikely character – a tax collector - a man

whose job required him to shake down his fellow townspeople for taxes for the emperor, who spent them in direct opposition to Jesus' priorities. What was rendered unto Ceasar was often invested in the emperor's glorification, entrenching his power and feathering his nest. Yet, the tax collector in this parable is offered to us as an exemplar of humility and the ultimate recipient of God's grace.

Let us return to the very beginning of this parable for an important context clue. Jesus describes his listeners as some folks who trusted in themselves ... and regarded others with contempt. In other words, regular old humans who compared themselves to the Joneses.

The Pharisee's apparent failing here is his blatant disregard for the others in whom he saw sin and not God's favor. He delights in distinguishing himself as being nothing like the tax collector, who can't even enter the Temple.

The Pharisee is doing right things, but his sin is that he holds up his piety as making him superior to others - to the presumed choices and unfaithfulness of others, which Jesus rejects. The tax collector, on the other hand is just loudly bewailing his sins and relying on God. THAT is why Jesus is distinguishing the tax collector as being righteous and in God's favor.

We are wise to avoid the exact same sin - to look at the humility of the tax collector and decide – hey Look, I'm humble. I'm THE most humble person you can imagine – you won't find another more humble human than me.....

And so – this Pharisee and this tax collector walk into a bar....and what they discover is that we have SO much in common. The Pharisee checks his self-righteousness at the door, and it turns out he is pretty interesting. When the tax collector enters the bar and looks up, he finds that he is in decent company. These two men, offered as shocking contrasts to what God is asking of us, given shared ground, engage in compelling, God-delighting conversation because their artifice is nowhere to be found.

The self-congratulatory pharisee is simply curious and engaged with another community member. The tax collector has left his nefarious ways and troubling job description at the door and is available to be his authentic self; struggling with his work-life balance like the rest of us. Wondering how he got into the tax collecting racket and curious to know his neighbor the pharisee.

These two are on the opposite sides of every political conversation, but, like us, they both yearn to be in God's favor.

Here is our advice for these former adversaries. Find a common place to come together. Find a welcoming spot in which to be authentic. God delights in our authenticity. God needs us to

be curious, available to learn and committed to self-improvement. Those are the traits that will allow us to get right with God.

Our invitation is the same. We have to reject the spiritual quicksand of self-righteousness, in favor of standing on the solid ground of human connection and community. It is among the gifts of our church community. We are called to enter this sanctuary with vulnerability and hope, assured that we are loved and known like our neighbors in the next pew.

God isn't asking the pharisee, the tax collector or any one of us, for perfection.

God knows and loves us, which requires us to know ourselves – at least to know ourselves better than, perhaps we do at this moment. God needs us to be humble and to do good in this world.

This isn't easy. The pharisee in this morning's parable spent a lifetime of study and effort and still got it wrong. The tax collector led a professional life in opposition to God's kingdom values, yet in his utter exasperation and dependence on God, he has shone a light forward for each of us.

In the week ahead, may we each check in with ourselves and God, through prayer and quiet reflection. May we each offer our curiosity and vulnerability to one another and to God's service. Our simple commitment to continuous improvement DELIGHTS God.

It is also great for this world. Bless you on this part of your spiritual journey. Bless St. Andrew's for prompting and valuing self-reflection and expected spiritual growth, and bless each of you who engage in the work required to be authentically righteous. Amen+