

Sermon

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost with Holy Baptism

Sunday, October 26th, 2025

Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: JOEL 2:23-32; PSALM 65; 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8, 16-18; LUKE 18:9-14

Last week I offered you the metaphor of swimming, suggesting that we needed to swim in our readings - that we needed to wade into the words, and dive under the surface of the parable we heard. We've got another parable this week: a story of a Pharisee and a tax collector. This week, rather than inviting you to dive under the surface of it, I'm going to ask you to step into the middle of it...

As you encounter this story of Pharisee and tax collector, whether for the first time or the tenth time, where do you find yourself wanting to stand in it? Do you want to stand next to the Pharisee, to align yourself with him? Or, do you want to keep your distance from this contemptuous character, and stand with the tax collector, beating your breast and begging for forgiveness as he does?

At the end of this parable, we hear this about the tax collector: "...I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *rather* than the other".

I mentioned Jewish scholar Amy-Jill last week, and I offer you her perspective again this week. In her book "Short Stories By Jesus", she suggests that "rather than" is a poor translation of the Greek preposition here. She translates it "*alongside*" instead of "*rather than*". So, she concludes the parable this way, "I tell you, this man (that is the tax collector), went down to his home justified alongside the other (the pharisee).

She believes that both the Pharisee and the tax collector are justified - that the Pharisee isn't justified by his actions, but simply by reaching for

relationship with God in prayer. Both Pharisee and tax collector do this - both reach for connection with God in prayer.

This makes the parable not about one side or the other, not about comparisons or judgment, but about relationship, connection, with God.

There is an opportunity for us to let the parable work in us by standing in the middle of it - by standing in the gap between the Pharisee and the tax collector.

When I stand in this gap between the Pharisee and the tax man I see two figures who are more similar than they are different. I see two figures who are stuck on the sidelines, one paralyzed by apparent pride and self-confidence, the other stuck in unworthiness. I see both men reaching, searching for God.

Parker Palmer is an American author, educator, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. He writes about the “tragic gap”. On one side of this tragic gap: the hard realities of this world, and on the other side, the hope, peace, joy and love that we know are possible because we’ve seen it, we’ve felt it. We stand, as followers of Jesus in the tragic gap, knowing that too much of one side or the other takes us out of the action. Too much of the hope, peace and joy that we know are possible leaves us stuck in ideology. Too much of the harsh realities of this world, and we are paralyzed by lament and despair.

The same is true in ourselves, in our interior life. We *are* beloved by God. God showed us how much we are loved in and through Jesus - in and through his life and ministry, in and through his suffering, death and Resurrection connecting us to God, forever. God loves us, and wants us to thrive and flourish in this life, but if we focus only on this, we risk pride and complacency taking us out of the action. No matter how hard we try, we do make mistakes. We stray from our connection with God and need

to turn back toward God's love, but too much focus on mistakes and missteps, on unworthiness, also takes us out of the action.

What if this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is more about staying in the action than anything else? By standing in the middle of the parable, we're reminded both pride and feelings of unworthiness can take us out of the action. The way that we stay in the action in both our interior and exterior lives is in relationship with God. We stay in the action by standing in the middle, in the midst, of all that goes on - in our hearts and minds, and in our world - and returning to our relationship, our connection with God, made possible, made eternal, in and through Jesus. We stay in the action by asking, again and again, how we can, in our time and place and space, join with God's mission, already unfolding in the world.

In a few moments, we're going to baptize Xander, Ethan and Amarah. It is a joy to celebrate this in community, and this sacrament - this outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace - is a promise made to live a life in the action. It's a promise to recognize and remember that it is our relationship with God in and through Jesus that keeps us in the action. It's a promise to stand in the tragic gap as Parker Palmer puts it, between the harsh realities of the world and the love, peace and hope that we know are possible in and through the way that the Gospel shows us, in and through the way that Jesus shows us.

We stand in the middle - in the middle of our parable, in the middle of the harsh realities and the potential and possibility in our world - we stand in the middle together. We hold the tension between what is now, and what will be, together. Together, with God and with each other. May we all find ways to stay in the action, between Pharisee and tax collector, between pride and feelings of unworthiness, between what is, and what we know in our hearts is possible. May we stay in the action with love, and in Jesus name. Amen.

