

Pharisee & Tax Collector- Meditation on Luke 18:9-14

In Jesus' stories we find truths framed in contrasts that provide opportunity to assess our relationship with the Divine.... a kind of spiritual tune-up. Jesus was blessed with an ability to make us see ourselves in ways that challenge us, and in developing our appetite for prayer, he was able **also** to plant seeds of self-awareness for us to ponder.

So, today we give thanks for this simple but profound story. On one hand we have an image of a person, a Pharisee, almost by definition a holy person with spiritual smarts, who approaches God in a place of prayer with utter confidence that he is doing everything required to guarantee access to divine grace and mercy in his life. His approach to God is performed in good conscience, founded on the belief that God favours the faithful ones, those who do their best to follow expectations and that God disregards those who make little effort to follow God's law. The Pharisee is quick to judge others as unworthy to have access to the ear of God.... and indeed, in his view, the lines are pretty clearly drawn and many don't make the grade. His pride and confidence get in the way of spiritual honesty, though, and as our understanding dawns, we perceive that a form of devotion that disparages others just won't work. We can't spiritually elevate ourselves at the expense of others, for then we would be separating love of God from love of neighbour....and that can't be done. And so we are left to wonder at the times when we ourselves have questioned whatever beliefs and motivations reside in the hearts of others in their attempts to draw closer to the throne of grace.

And then, just as we hear our own biases on the lips of the Pharisee, as if that's not enough of a comeuppance, our sight is drawn to the tax collector – a person despised in society and a traitor to his people in Jesus' day, a cheat and a liar, a person to whom, we would assume, perhaps as we would even hope, God would offer neither mercy **nor** forgiveness. Despised in the eyes of humanity, surely he will also be despised in the eyes of God. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, Jesus says **no**. Even a proverbial scum of the earth like the tax collector has access to the grace of God. The difference is in the attitude, it seems. The tax collector knows he does wrong and doesn't try to hide it. He has no delusions of grandeur.... only a sickening realization in the pit of his stomach that he has done wrong, that he is inescapably human, but he wants to get right with God. He doesn't try to make himself sound better than he is, and he comes with no bargaining chips - but simply prays with humility and a willingness to receive from God's bottomless well of love. He is the one, Jesus says, who leaves the place of prayer in right relationship with God.... because he carries no pretensions. His honesty and humility are the key.

So, remind us, loving God, when we're tempted to believe that we're better than we are, or that others are **worse** than we are, that the game of measuring the holiness of others by some imaginary yardstick just isn't a reality in your Kingdom. Remind us gently to leave our pride

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behind, to see ourselves as we really are, to accept our common humanity, and to know beyond doubt that you cannot be fooled. Help us to know that the bottomless well of your love and compassion will never run dry – that there is enough for all.... even for tax collectors and Pharisees. Amen.