

Pentecost 20, Lectionary 30, Year C  
Sunday, October 23, 2022  
Luke 18:9-14

I guess it would be nine years ago when I preached on this text at the Lutheran Student Centre in Saskatoon, and I started the sermon with a prayer that went something like this: “I thank you, O God, that I drive a car that gets terrific gas mileage, and not one of those SUVs; I drink only Organic Fair Trade coffee and I buy only locally produced eggs and sausage. I thank you that I am not like those people who do other things.”

I was just kidding, of course. But I sort of wasn't. I can be pretty smug about the things that I'm pretty sure I do right, and if I don't quite look down on people who don't do the same I can still stand aside and wonder why they don't see and do things the way I do. It is easy for me to become like that character I think I'm not like at all. I thank you, God, that I'm not like that Pharisee who keeps on saying, “I thank you God that I'm not like...them.”

And today, nine years after the prayer at the Lutheran Student Centre? “I thank you that I don't drive an SUV and that I drink Fair Trade, and only eat local?” Well, I drive an SUV, and that Organic Fair Trade coffee's really tasty but really expensive and sometimes I just buy the regular stuff to save a few dollars. And while local Winkler sausage is my favourite, that Italian stuff that's produced in a factory in Ontario or Wisconsin or somewhere is really good too. I've become what I was glad not to be. It's like a wise person I live with has often said – “Be careful what you complain about in someone else, because if you do it enough you'll end up becoming that yourself.”

The story Jesus tells holds up a mirror and shows us a world that we know well, and shows us how easily we can get trapped in it. We know all about judgement and division and how much harm is done when one group starts thinking they're better than the other. So the Pharisee is bad because he sees a world of us and them – I'm on the good side and I'm not like those ones over there on the bad side. And as soon as we see that we know that we shouldn't be like the Pharisee. He's bad. And it's so easy to become what we condemn. I'm so glad I'm not like one of those self-righteous people.

But we're not actually called to divide the world into the good guys and the bad guys. It's just the world. And all these people. Beloved of God. All of them. All of us. The self-righteous and the self-deprecating; the ones who do everything right and the ones who are sure they do everything wrong, or who have always been told that they do; the ones who are so respected and the ones who are just put off to the side. We're all actually just gathered up into a big "us."

So maybe this is what's going on in this story and in the world:

Consider the Pharisee. If you're familiar with the stories you've probably heard about Pharisees and heard all kinds of bad things. You know: they're self righteous, bossy, judgemental; they get a bad name. But the writer of the gospel of Luke doesn't seem to think they're all bad. Like this one in the story, who says to God, "I'm glad that I don't steal other people's stuff, and that I don't go around causing grief, and I'm faithful to my own beloved one, and I'm generous." That sounds good, doesn't it?

But consider the Pharisee for a moment. What's the first thing Jesus says about him? "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying like this..." The Pharisee, standing by himself... Jesus doesn't really say what all else is going on all around, but the Pharisee is standing by himself and saying, "I'm glad I'm the way I am and I'm not like that person over there. I do all of these things that make me not like them and maybe even better than them." And the Pharisee is standing by himself and praying like that.

The temple's a busy place, there are people all around, streaming in out all day and into the night, and the Pharisee is standing by himself and saying, "I'm glad I'm not like them." That is a lonely place to be and a lonely thing to say, because the more any of us say "I'm glad I'm not like that one over there and that one over there," the more likely it is that we'll just end up standing over here all by ourselves.

And the more you or I start to say, "I do this and this and that right, and that makes me good enough," the more likely it is that we end up standing alone. And the more likely it is that we end up...just worn out from trying to be good enough, just exhausted from always trying to keep the list of things I do right longer than the list of things I've done wrong.

Or maybe this is what it's like: Consider the tax collector. Tax collectors worked for the Roman government, way off there in, well, Rome, and they collected taxes to send far far away to Rome and they collected a little more or a lot more to line their own pockets. Maybe they were kind of crooked and

dishonest, or maybe they just needed to do that to scrape by and make a living. People didn't really like tax collectors, because they were seen as dishonest and they were seen as traitors.

The temple's a busy place, and people are streaming in and out all day and into the night and the Pharisee is standing off by himself and the tax collector is standing far off – alone too? - and won't even look up, and can only just say, "Have mercy on me, God, have mercy on me, this sinner." I'm guessing that the tax collector doesn't need to go off and stand alone. They don't need to go anywhere to get away, because nobody wants to be with them anyway.

It's not a good thing if someone is judgemental, and self-righteous, and they use their accomplishments and good behaviour to prove that they're better than someone else. And it's not a good thing if someone can only look down, and avoid eye contact with people let alone with God, and say nothing more of themselves than, "Have mercy on me, I'm a sinner."

Remember this: You and I are not our accomplishments, our successes, and the things we have done right. You and I are not our failures, the things we have done wrong, or the things we have neglected to do.

Before anything else, we are the beloved of God. It's a promise spoken to us in our baptism, when water is poured over the head of the one who will become self-righteous and difficult some day, and water is poured over the head of the one who will become burdened by guilt and unable to raise up their eyes. And whichever one of those you are on any given day, it can't stop the good word that you are a beloved child of God. Always. And you know, long before you or I came along, that word was spoken when God breathed life into the earth and the

sea and the sky and the animals and even the people, and God said, "This is good. This is all good."

Jesus tells this story about a Pharisee who stands all by himself and a tax collector who stands far away. He tells this story about two who are standing alone, even though there are people all around. And as the story of the gospel unfolds, it's not long after this that Jesus will travel into Jerusalem where he will live and die in that drama we've heard so many times, with its betrayal and loyalty and love and hate and gentleness and violence and being together and being alone. The community will end up scattered, with some staying close to Jesus and some going away, standing alone or hiding alone or judging each other, alone, like people do when everyone's afraid, or not able to raise their eyes out of fear or out of shame. Alone.

Then the news will trickle out that Jesus has risen, and as the story continues, the risen Jesus will start to pull that community back together, where the ones who stood alone or who were hiding alone are brought back together into a community where no one is left alone. And the story will continue, and the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the risen Jesus, will keep bringing the broken ones back together, even in a place like this right here and right now.

Because that's what's going on in this whole story that we are a part of today. The Spirit keeps calling us into a community, where no one stands alone (unless, you know, you're an introvert like me and you just enjoy the solitude. You know...) The Spirit keeps calling us into a community where we are set free from the lonely work of proving that we belong or that someone else does not. The

Spirit of the risen Jesus keeps shaping us into a community where no one needs to stand alone in judgement or stand alone in shame. No one is pushed to the side, and no one is left to stand alone. Instead, the Spirit just calls us together. Justified. Made new. Beloved of God. AMEN.