

Sermon for Pentecost 20

26 October 2025

Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

This morning's Gospel reading brings us in the stillness of the Temple, where two men stand to pray. Both are faithful Jews; both believe in God's mercy. Yet only one leaves the Temple "justified." It's a deceptively simple story — a Pharisee and a tax collector; one respected, the other despised. But Jesus's parables rarely behave themselves, and resist our attempts to neatly moralize them. This isn't a fable about the bad man becoming good or the good man becoming bad: it's a revelation of who God is — and what happens when human pride tries to crowd out divine grace.

You see, the Pharisee's mistake isn't his piety — his fasting, tithing, and devotion are commendable, and are indeed forms of holiness that we might rightly emulate. His error lies in comparing himself to others. "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people" is not the prayer of gratitude but of superiority. The moment we define our worth by comparing ourselves to our neighbour, we cease to pray *with* God and begin to talk *at* God.

In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector cannot lift his eyes. Yet his emptiness becomes space for the Holy Spirit to inhabit. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" is the shortest of prayers, yet by acknowledging our utter reliance on God it packs a punch and opens the widest door.

The proud heart leaves no room for the work of the Holy Spirit, while the contrite heart becomes God's dwelling-place. Our culture prizes competence and control, something to which the Church isn't immune; often mistaking success for sanctity, or measuring our vitality by attendance and budgets. Yet while numbers have their place, our true health lies in those who dare to kneel and whisper, "God, be merciful" and our ministries flourish only when they are rooted in a posture of confession rather than competition.

Our image of God shapes everything — how we pray, how we act, what we hope for. The Pharisee imagines God as rewarding achievement; while the tax collector encounters a God who listens to lament. If we see God as a divine auditor, we will forever be wrapped up in balancing moral ledgers; but if we know God as merciful, kind, and gracious, we will have the courage to bring our wounds for God's healing. At the altar each of us stands as forgiven sinners, and not as spiritual achievers. Whether we are vested or in street clothes, we approach the same Body and Blood of our Lord. The Eucharist levels us — the Pharisee and the tax collector kneel side by side; the proud are emptied and the emptied are filled.

To first-century listeners, the idea of a “justified” tax collector would have been scandalous — these were men who collaborated with Rome; they were despised for skimming their share off the taxes they collected. Yet Jesus declares one beloved. This is because God's grace disregards our social hierarchies. Today's “publicans” (as the King James bible calls the tax collector) — our unhoused neighbours, addicts, refugees, queer youth rejected by church and family — must hear that they are precious, created in the very image of God. Those whom the world discards suffer with Christ, crucified on crosses of homophobia, sexism, racism, agesism (you get the picture), so that, as Paul writes in Romans, they may be “co-heirs with him” (8:17). Salvation for people are marginalized is the journey from non-personhood to personhood; from worthlessness to dignity. And the Church's mission is to embody that transformation — to tell every wounded soul, “You are worthy of God's love,” and to do so in a spirit of humility and generosity; acknowledging that humility is not grovelling, but truth-telling. In a culture where weakness is taboo, confessing our weakness becomes an act of courage; and it is precisely this honest that catch's God's attention. When we offer our vulnerability, God fills it with strength; and when we confess our emptiness, God fills it with the presence of the Holy Spirit. We may live in a world that rewards confidence, yet heaven listens for the trembling voice that says, “Have mercy.”

Luke loves this theme of reversal — the angel’s song at Bethlehem promised “good news of great joy for all the people” — a joy that overturns the world’s expectations. In the Magnificat Mary sang, “He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts” — a prophecy that we see fulfilled in this morning’s parable: the Pharisee’s self-image collapses under grace, and the tax collector’s shame is transfigured into dignity. Yet notice that Jesus neither canonizes the publican nor condemns the Pharisee. He simply says, “This man went home justified.” Both are invited into conversion: the Pharisee to humility, and the tax collector to confidence in God’s forgiveness. Grace calls each of them — and each of us — to see ourselves and our neighbours through God’s eyes. This is perhaps the parable’s truest invitation — to look differently; not to choose sides, but to have our sight healed and to see others for who they truly are rather than who we imagine them to be.

Teacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor describes this shift as an act of faith: encountering others as strangers made in the image and likeness of God. She says we needn’t begin with the hardest people; we can start with those already before us:

“The next time you go to the grocery store, try engaging the cashier. You do not have to invite her home for lunch or anything, but take a look at her face while she is trying to find whatever you have picked up on her laminated list of produce. Here is someone who exists even when she is not ringing up your groceries, as hard as that may be for you to imagine. She is someone’s daughter, maybe someone’s mother as well. She has a home she returns to when she hangs up her apron here, a kitchen that smells of last night’s supper, a bed where she occasionally lies awake at night wrestling with her own demons and angels. ‘You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at [Safeway],’ she says looking right at you. Just meet her eyes for a moment when you say, ‘Thanks.’ Sometimes that is all another person needs to know that she has been seen — not as the cashier but as the person.” *All that is required is that you look back.*

This small act of looking back is the antidote to the Pharisee's arrogance in comparison, and it serves as reminder of grace in miniature — noticing the person before us as beloved, as a bearer of God's image. When we look at the world this way, every glance becomes a prayer — a confession that we are all beggars for God's mercy and that we are all recipients of unearned love.

In a few moments when we gather at this altar to receive the Sacrament, we come as that tax collector did — empty, unworthy, and yet welcomed with open arms. The same Spirit who filled his hollow heart fills ours. Here at this altar, the self-assured are unsettled, and the self-condemned are lifted up. Here mercy takes flesh again.

Our vocation as the Church is not to prove our own righteousness, but to become transparent to God's. To let the Holy Spirit inhabit our emptiness; to root our ministry in confession and not competition; to measure our lives not by perfection but by mercy, and to proclaim to every despised soul that they are loved, dignified, and destined for glory.

Because all who humble themselves will be exalted — not by human acclaim, but by the hand of God who raises the lowly and fills the hungry with good things.

Amen.