

Luke tells us that Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector to folks who trusted in themselves, and, as a result, had a habit of looking on others with contempt. In other words, he might well have said, "Jesus told this parable to Aaron Miller." Jesus strolls into U Hill on a Sunday morning, and lobs this parable of two praying men in among *us*.

Now, I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings here, but if our feelings are hurt at the idea that we, as often as not, occupy the position of the Pharisee in this parable, then that kind of proves the point. If our gut reaction is to scoff at the arrogance of the Pharisee, to thank God that we're *way* more humble than that guy, then we're probably not quite as humble as we think. I suppose it's possible that I'm the only one here this morning who has a habit of being pretty pleased with myself when I do what's right, when I am faithful, but I doubt it.

And we come by it honestly, sort of. We have been raised with the idea that we know right from wrong--that we know what is the good thing to do, at least most of the time. And when we do what's right, when we do what's good, it's awfully hard to avoid the feeling that we have things pretty well together. And then, at least for me, it's pretty hard to avoid wondering why others don't have things as together as I do.

I don't know if it's worse for us as good religious folks, who are trying to adhere to God's word, trying to follow Jesus and do what he says. But I think we have our own kind of special temptations. There's a well documented irony that some temptations are only available to followers of Jesus. That's partly because a lot of the things we are called to do, out of Christian devotion, require some pretty significant stuff from us. We're called to forgive wildly, and be recklessly generous; we're called to be faithful and bold; we're called to be uncommonly

loving. We're called to be righteous, perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect! We're called to be radically committed to the will and way of the one who created the heavens and the earth, and who is making all things new!

And I know--I'll speak for myself--that when I actually do manage to get close to something that looks like faithfulness to Jesus, I'm never very far away from noticing how unfaithful others are. When I'm generous, another's stinginess stands out; when I forgive, I see how petty others are; when I give myself in love, I can't help but notice how self-indulgent the world around us is. And in those moments, I may not quite pray like the Pharisee in the parable, but I don't have to. God knows my heart.

One thing that's helpful in understanding what Jesus is saying to us, is to pay attention to the fact that the Pharisee is fixated what he does. His self-righteousness, his trusting in himself is based on his having accomplished the things of a faithful life. He tithes and fasts, he doesn't steal, or carouse, he's not unfaithful to his wife. He knows the right thing, and he does it. He's above reproach when it comes to following the rules. In the court of public opinion, he is unquestionably right. He looks just terribly faithful...

The great preacher, Tom Long, tells a story that began when he made a poor decision pulling out of a gas station parking lot. He was trying to turn left, across several lanes, on a busy street. The problem started when he took a chance and scooted out...and made it most of the way. He ended up with his tail end sticking out into on-coming traffic. Unfortunately, for Tom, there was a particularly zealous police officer watching the whole thing unfold, and all of a sudden, Tom found himself at the side of the road, in front of a cruiser with all its lights flashing.

Needless to say, this was annoying. That he had been pulled over for something so minor was more than a touch puzzling. And so he asked the officer just what traffic violation he had committed, to which the officer barked some infraction number--23-904.21/2, or something like that--tossed the ticket through the window, and said, "Look it up."

Well. Tom happens to be the professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology, which is part of Emory University, in Atlanta GA. And he happens to have some friends in the law department at the university. And, unlike any reasonable person who would have just paid the ticket, he did look it up. He had his lawyer friends do some special digging for him. And he discovered, much to his glee that in fact he hadn't committed the violation he'd been charged with. Full of confidence, and quite pleased with himself, he booked his day in court, to challenge the ticket.

His day in court came around, and in spite of his wife's embarrassment, he marched off to the courthouse with a file folder full of information that was guaranteed to get him off the hook. Finally, the moment came, when the judge called him forward. He strode up to the bench with all his evidence in hand. And the judge said, "The officer who gave you this ticket doesn't work here anymore. There's no one here to accuse you. You can go."

Tom says he was furious! He didn't want to be forgiven and acquitted; he wanted to be right! He wanted to be righteous in the eyes of the law, justified by his own merit!

There are several beautiful gospel moments in Tom's story--there's a whole sermon at least to be preached on the fact that our accuser doesn't work here anymore. But for today, I expect that most people can relate to Tom's response. It's way more

fun to be right, than to need forgiveness. In religious terms, it's way more satisfying to take stock of what we've done, than to account for the fact that we, in spite of all the things we might well get right, are an awfully long way from being perfect, that we regularly fall well short of the glory of God.

And, truth be told, not only does it seem to be better for our egos, it's a lot less risky to treat God as One who can be tamed by our best rule-following, than to deal with God as He comes to us. Jesus essentially says that the Pharisee's self-satisfaction is the gravest form of delusion. Because he's pretended to deal with God, but all he's really done is try to court God's favor as though he could earn his way into God's good graces. But it's a ridiculous endeavour. If God is truly God, then his ways are so not our ways, his thoughts are so not our thoughts, and that means that holding up our accomplishments as a measure of our worthiness before God is utterly silly. The Pharisee, in all his spiritual preening, is a fool.

The tax collector has no illusions about his ability to measure up to God. I think it's probably wrong to assume that he was an absolute reprobate. Jesus doesn't tell us that he wasn't nice to his kids, or that he was unfaithful to his wife. Of course, everyone knew that tax collectors were often (maybe always) terribly crooked. But we don't get any of those details. What we see is that the tax collector, whatever his character flaws, has a clearer understanding of who he's dealing with, when he deals with God--the God of the burning bush and the Red Sea, the God whose word shakes the mountains and turns oak trees to matchsticks, the God whose breath brings order out of chaos, and life out of death. Both of these men came to pray: one came to deal with the Living God, and one came to show God what a good boy he'd been. Jesus doesn't leave any room for interpretation about who settled for less.

The unavoidable truth is that when we come to deal with the Living God, we can't help but recognize our inadequacy. That's not over-wrought humility; it's just honesty, if we believe in a God who is really God. Any attempt to measure up by our own efforts is madness; it's wildly arrogant and hopelessly deluded. We have no business looking to heaven.

But it's precisely there, when we realize that, that the full power of the gospel can have its effect. We have no business looking to heaven, and yet. And yet. When we come vulnerably and honestly to God, we come to the God who knows that we're dust. *We're* the ones about whom Jesus prayed, "Forgive them; they don't know what they're doing." I always find it a bit of a relief to remember that God doesn't have any illusions about us. God knows us. God knows who we really are--not what we've done or failed to do--but that we are, first and foremost, the objects of divine love. We are created out of love, for love. We are the glory of God, created for His enjoyment. And the truth is that we can't understand that except as we come to God as God is: fully aware that by our own merits we have no business doing so. God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

Something I've seen over and over again, in my own life and in the lives of others, is that it's exhausting to be like the Pharisee. There's a character in a Flannery O'Connor story, who knows that "the best way to avoid Jesus is to avoid sin." But avoiding Jesus is awfully hard work. He keeps showing up. Everywhere I go, there I am, and he always gets there first. Trying to stay ahead of Jesus, trying to outrun God's grace, is not something I've managed to do with any real success, try as I might. It always ends with me tripping and falling flat on my face--brought low not by God's wrath, but by my own foolish attempts to keep God's relentless love at bay.

The good news is that when we find ourselves face-down in the dust from which we've been made, we discover that ours is the God who meets us in the dust. This is the scandal of the gospel: that God refuses to stay away from us, that God does not wait for us to get it right, does not wait for us to prove our worthiness, but comes close, and by His presence, by boundless mercy, by amazing grace, transforms us.

And there is transformation. There can't not be. And what we do does matter, but everything's reversed. As Will Willimon puts it, in the Christian life, the indicative "You are" comes *before* the imperative, "You ought." "***You are***" comes *before* "***You ought***." When we encounter God's radical grace, we discover who we are. We are reminded not only that we have failed to live up to our God-bearing image, but that we are made that way in the first place. And when we receive that, we tend--in spite of ourselves--to be shaped more and more in the hope, peace, joy and love of Jesus, for which we have been created.

The parable ends with the tax collector heading home. I can't help but see him practically skipping up the road, no longer looking down at his feet, no longer with his eyes on the dust, but by and in the grace of God, his eyes, his heart, his life lifted up to heaven.

Thanks be to God.

