

Proper 25

On the surface, the parable Jesus tells in this morning's gospel reading is about prayer, about humility, about attitudes we bring to prayer. But at its core, this is about sin—our ability to recognize our sin. Our ability to admit our sin. Our ability to repent our sin and make a pivot to another way of being in life, in our community, in our family, in our insides. This passage is about the fact that humans sin, and, then how we go on to handle that reality.

And, it is about God's attitude about our sin. To God, our sin is an unfortunate reality. Once God decided, or human consciousness evolved to the point that, that we could make choices, choices between good and bad, right and wrong; once there was knowledge of good, evil, right wrong, and we could choose one or the other; well human curiosity, human nature, human stubbornness, meant that we would indeed choose the wrong action sometimes. In the words of the Bible, we would sin. In fact, we can't help but sin—it is a part of being human beings with free will.

St. Paul, one of our Christian heroes, did heroic things to spread the news of God's love; he was generous with his time and energy, he was persistent in his efforts to explain Jesus to Jews and Gentiles alike, sometimes he was chased and hunted down for doing that. And yet even St. Paul struggled with sin. He wrote these famous words when talking about himself in his letter to the Romans: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* Ever been there?

St Paul has the same problem as we all do: he knows the difference between right and wrong and yet, even he, sometimes does the very thing he hates, the thing he doesn't want to do. Paul had human nature figured out, and we are fickle, at best, devious and stubbornly hate-filled at worst. Even the best of us can't help but sin. This passage we read this morning from Luke is about our unavoidable capacity to sin and this passage today is also about God's response to our sin.

Basically, it includes, is wrapped around, the truth that God doesn't leave us without options. There is always the option to stop in our tracks, and turn around and travel the pathway that will bring out the best in us as humans. The biggest response God has to our sin is to not give up on humans. On our human race when we really mess up; on us as individuals when we really mess up.

We have a name for that reality, that truth, in the Christian tradition: it is called grace. Grace is that characteristic of God that does not ever give up; God's grace persistently works to bring us back to our best selves; loves us through all our ups and downs and failures; wants to see us succeed in being human. Never giving up on our capacity to choose a better path, never failing to keep that better path as an open option for us to choose.

Grace is how God loves us.

So, in this parable that Jesus tells this morning, he is teaching us something about this graceful nature of God. It is a critical concept that will again come up in St. Paul's writings, and the importance of grace will come roaring back in the early 16th century through the writings of Martin Luther.

And the truth that St. Paul, and Martin Luther, and Jesus want us to remember is that there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's love and forgiveness. To earn God's grace. That is the mistake the Pharisee has made. He thinks he can earn God's grace. But no amount of tithing, no amount of sacrifices and prayers and acts of charity or anything else the Pharisee thinks up can earn God's love and favor. Grace-- abundant and persistent love, is simply a part of the nature of God and that's that.

That's what the Pharisee doesn't get. That's what the Pharisee has forgotten. God doesn't need our sacrifices, our burnt offerings—we do those things for ourselves, to help us remember, to help ourselves stop and take note of how we are lining up with God's desire for us. But it isn't our sacrifices and burnt offerings God wants, it's our hearts God wants.

God wants hearts that are in sync with his own heart.

AS the prophet Micah wrote: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

And the tax collector in our parable this morning? He's the one who gets it. He's the one who is brave enough to say "God, I have messed up." He is the one for whom Jesus has the greatest hope. Because it is only when we know, as humans, that we have messed up, that we have any hope of ever choosing another way. If we don't see that we have messed up, chosen badly; if we can't admit that we've fallen short of God's dream for us, if we are too proud to admit it, then we have absolutely no hope of ever choosing better.

If we can't humble ourselves, admitting both our human failing and God's persistent, graceful love, we are just stuck where we are and things can't change. We can't move, as God longs for us to move, any closer to being the wonderful creatures God creates us to be.

To get moving, we have to see where we are, know that we are lost, and accept the radical notion that God loves us and wants us to find our way back to the promise of being human. Back to hearts that practice justice, who love mercy, who desire to walk with God.

The Pharisee, he's so full of himself that he can't yet see how much he needs God. But it is the tax collector, that beloved tax collector who has probably already sat at the dinner table with Jesus, he is the one who Jesus points us toward in this parable, because it is the tax collector who has got it right.

The tax collector, knows himself, knows his sin. And because he knows his sin, because he hates his sin, he is the one who is ready to turn to his true home in God, and let God love him back to health and life. He is held up as an example by Jesus because he is the one who *truly knows* his need for God.

AMEN.