

Pentecost 23 – C (2016)

Luke 18:9-14

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

You've already heard me talk about Garrison Keillor and his radio show: A Prairie Home Companion. He was/is a great story teller and I would love to be able to tell stories as well as he did. But he's retired now and no longer telling the stories of Lake Wobegon: the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve; Lake Wobegon: where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children---are above average.

In our song today, "A Pharisee Was Praying," based on Luke 18:9-14, Jesus is speaking to average people who tend to see themselves as better than average. Studies show that nine in 10 managers rate themselves as superior to their average colleagues, as do nine in 10 college professors. According to professor of psychology David Myers, most drivers — even those who have been hospitalized after accidents — believe themselves to be safer and more skilled than the average driver.

That attitude is prevalent in our society – that we're all above average. "The one thing that unites all human beings, regardless of age, gender, religion, economic status or ethnic background," notes humorist Dave Barry, "is that deep down inside, we all believe that we are above average drivers."

If we read the story from the Bible, the first verse of the Luke reading today will say, "Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else." Jesus makes it clear what is at stake here: He is correcting people overconfident in their own righteousness and despising everyone else, and instead pointing His disciples to trust in God's mercy and offer mercy--constantly.

The story-teller/preacher and theologian Fred Craddock has pointed out, perhaps the greatest danger for church people is that we will too easily identify with the repentant tax collector and thus leave church thinking, "Thank God I am not a Pharisee." Boom. Just thinking that makes us the Pharisee.

And yet, is it always so terribly wrong to give ourselves a pat on the back when we know we've done okay? Why would people even

come to this Church or want to belong to this Church if it wasn't doing something right and if we weren't working at being Christians and even being successful? Is it so wrong to say something like, "Thank you, God, for helping me get through that, for helping me get it right?" Because, sometimes, we do get it right.

I suspect that many of the people in this Congregation are over 60 and Paul, in his Letter to Timothy, is speaking to you too, offering a word of encouragement because you have lived pretty faithfully and there is a time to reflect on your life. You can bless some of those efforts and look back with gratitude on what you have done and how you have lived and the ministries you have worked on and supported and still support.

Hearing 2 Timothy, when do we get to tell those stories and how can we tell them without making ourselves sound like super-Christians? The same thing with the Luke parable, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: Jesus probably didn't mean for our response to be, "Thank God I am not like that Pharisee." How do we talk about our spiritual victories without sounding superior? We know that, in spite of our best efforts, we have failed and we have sinned and it's going to happen again.

One afternoon a carpet layer had just finished installing carpet for a lady. He stepped out for a smoke, only to realize that he had lost his cigarettes. After a quick, but fruitless search, he noticed that in the middle of the room, under the carpet that he had just installed, was a bump. His cigarettes!

"No sense pulling up the entire floor for one pack of smokes," the carpet layer said to himself. So, he got out his mallet and flattened the bump.

Not long after, as he was cleaning up, the owner of the house came in. "Here," she said, handing him his pack of cigarettes. "I found them in the hallway. Now," she said, "if only I could find my parakeet."

Oops.

Sometimes we know when we've made a mistake. Sometimes we don't.

It's the ones we *don't* see that can really bite us.

But there is hope and there is grace. The tax collector restores his relationship with God by asking for forgiveness, while the Pharisee moves farther away from God by boasting of his righteousness.

This isn't what the hearers of the parable expect. They had been taught that good behavior draws you closer to God, while bad behavior drives you away. But Jesus is insisting that unless we are aware of our secret faults, and humble enough to acknowledge them and know that we need forgiveness, we're going to discover that our minor mistakes can get out of control and destroy us.

The story behind the song becomes good news for us because it allows us to examine ourselves honestly and from the perspective of faith. It is true that we are not, nor will we ever be, the people that God would have us be. We are still moving on to perfection and that is precisely why God sent His Son, Jesus Christ. God gives us His Son because, left to our own resources, we could never gain the recognition nor the approval from God that we so desperately desire.

The gift of the Son lifts from our shoulders the burden of our need to please God - to gain God's favor. Jesus' arrival into our lives helps us admit that we are not, nor will we ever be, on the same level as God. Jesus' presence in our lives makes us humbly aware of the great lengths that God will go to rescue us: the people of God. Jesus, then, becomes the positive proof that God's mercy is great, God's mercy is wide, and that God's covenant love of God's people is resolute and steadfast.

How different it is with God's great mercy. The mercy that God gives to us is eternal. It will not fade. Rather, it will remain great and ever present, not only in our lives, not only now, but throughout eternity. But how do we get that mercy; how do we live to access God's grace?

The "Last Year Test" may be one way. If this were your last year to live, would you really watch so much television, play so many video games, play so much golf, spend so much time at the club, do so much travelling, go to so many concerts, eat out so much -- waste so much time? Nothing intrinsically wrong with these things, of course.

But would you –

- read more books or fewer books?
- spend more time or less time with friends?
- spend more time or less time with family?
- go shopping more frequently or less frequently?
- take more walks or fewer walks?
- volunteer more or less?
- attend worship services more often or less often?

pray more or less?

eat more chocolate and ice cream or less chocolate and ice cream?

To put it another way, what if you took the "Last Year" test and lived your life right now as if you knew that this was your last year to live? Would the activities you do today or tomorrow pass the "Last Year" test? Would you turn off the TV and spend more time with your family? Would you stop following Facebook as much as you do and pick up your Bible or spend some time journaling instead? Would you go outside and enjoy the cool snap of the autumn air and the crunch of fallen leaves or watch another Green Bay Packer football game?

When we think about the "Last Year" test, we might be tempted to think that our lives are really the sum total of what we've accomplished. We might assume that what we've accumulated in material possessions is what really matters. Paul, in his Letter to Timothy, reminds us that, for the Christian, the only real answer to the "Last Year" test is faithfulness to God.

In the end, Paul understood that the only prize, the only goal in life that really matters, is the "crown of righteousness" that awaits those who have kept the faith (v. 8). Such a crown is not something we achieve by our own effort, since even our best efforts and accomplishments pale in comparison to God's goodness. No, this reward is not achieved or merited, but, instead, given to us as a gift.

In other words, a life of faithfulness to Christ is a response to the faithfulness of Christ for us. When we focus on *His* death and resurrection, we come to realize that death itself will ultimately be defeated and that the things we do in this life have eternal implications.

Paul says that his life has "already been poured out as an offering to God." He is giving himself fully over to God and encouraging Timothy and us to do the same. Give it your all. Pour out your best. Fight the good fight; finish the race. Offer it all to God with joyous abandon. But know and remember that by ourselves, in our own strength, we're not going to make it, for Paul reminds us that it is only God who gave him the strength, stayed constantly with him, and rescued him time and again. Be faithful; remember God's grace; fight the good fight; finish the race and receive the prize: life with God forever.