

October 26, 2025  
Proper 25-C  
Trinity, St. Louis  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Sirach 35:12-17*

*Psalm 84:1-6*

*2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18*

*Luke 18:9-14*

*In the Name of God: whom we worship  
as the Holy & Undivided Trinity. Amen.*

In the course of our daily life, we are asked countless questions. “Did you remember to walk the dog?” “Do you want to go to the movies tonight?” “What’s for dinner?” “Do you like my hair this way?” But there’s one question that is guaranteed to stop us in our tracks. “Who do you think you are?”

How many of us have had that question seared into our souls early in life? Did it come from someone in authority? A teacher or a parent? A coach or a member of the clergy? Maybe it sprang from their own frustration and exasperation, but we knew that we had crossed some line, that we had transgressed some acceptable behavior.

“Who do you think you are?” To be honest, it’s not really even a question, is it? Can you imagine answering it? It is a rhetorical question that has the answer built right in. And the answer that we learned very early on was “I went too far; I am a disappointment.”

In today's Gospel, Jesus presents us with another way at getting at this question of who we think we are. In the verse immediately before today's reading, at the end of last week's account of the widow and the judge, Jesus asks, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (or the Publican, for those of us who are older), Jesus illustrates two radically different ways of being before God, of being people of faith.

+ + +

Just like last week, we heard about the widow and the judge, today we have another pair of contrasting characters: the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The comparison of two stock characters followed by a surprise was a story-telling method well known in antiquity; we still use it today.

Let's look first at the Pharisee. Every time you and I encounter Pharisees in the Bible, we've been raised to think that there's going to be Trouble with a capital T. But that's not quite fair and, perhaps, just a little bit antisemitic. In Jesus' time, Pharisees were well-respected, even revered models of religious resistance to the pressures of a pagan empire.

Our fellow today tried to do everything that he thought God asked of him. He was following the user's manual as closely as possible. He pursued spiritual disciplines; he did good work in the community.

Now, there he is in the Temple, standing, which was the proper position for prayer. And what happens? He starts by thanking God that he's not like other people. OK, sure, the people from whom he is different aren't exactly role models: thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors. Mark Twain might have said, "He was a good man in the worst sense of the word."

In her book on the parables called "The Short Stories of Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi," Amy-Jill Levine cautions us at this point. She says that how we evaluate the Pharisee may tell us more about ourselves than about him. Whatever we might think, we should note that the Pharisee's prayer is, still, directed to God.

AJ suggests that rather than being arrogant, the Pharisee is expressing sincere gratitude to God for being able to be a faithful Jew. For the first-century Jew, Jesus' description of this Pharisee might have been heard as a humorous depiction of a hyper-pious member of the community.

+ + +

Meanwhile, standing over on the edge of the scene, is the Tax Collector. In our day, no one is a big fan of the Internal Revenue Service. In Jesus' day, though, tax collectors were unpopular because their wealth and power were accumulated by ill-doing, including collaboration with the Roman overlords.

The typical tax collector was seen as an oppressor, a wealthy crook, but not an object of pity. Jesus' audience would have thought it scandalous that the Tax Collector would even dare to enter the Temple. But I want us to put thinking about lists of deeds – good or bad – to the side for the moment.

The Tax Collector simply pours himself out before God: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He calls upon God alone. Jesus tells us that the Tax Collector went home justified, rather than the other, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." A Tax Collector could be righteous? Justified? God's grace could cover even this man's sin? Now, that's unsettling to us, isn't it?

+ + +

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" How do we hear this parable this morning in the Central West End? Who do we think we are? I grew up hearing this parable as a cautionary tale.

Don't be like that Pharisee.

Instead, go home and do humble things like the Tax Collector.

Then, you'll be right with God.

But this is a trap, isn't it? Because, if we follow this pattern, we end up saying "God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee." And, presto change-o, we become the people Jesus is addressing – trusting in our own

worth, and regarding others with contempt. We end up exalting ourselves, even while knowing that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled.”

+ + +

Let’s spend a moment thinking about humility. I can hear you now, “do we really have to?” For many of us, humility is getting boxed on the ears when someone thinks we’ve gotten too big for our britches ... when we need to be taken down a peg or two. Humility has been confused with a sort of self-destructive submissiveness. Being humble meant being humiliated; being humble meant being a doormat.

Late in life, I hope not too late, I’ve begun to learn that humility is not so much thinking less of myself than it is thinking of myself less often.

True humility, I think, is about holding in balance and tension two truths that often seem to be at odds with one another. One truth is that we are created in God’s image, in goodness. Another truth is that we sin – constructing walls of deeds (good or bad) around us; putting ourselves in God’s place.

Humility is knowing that both of these truths are true at the same time. Humility is knowing who we actually are, both gifts and goofs, both wonders and warts. For those of us who grew up, or still live, in marginalized communities, where toxic combinations of family, church and society have long battered us with preaching that we are, by nature, bad or sinful, this can be a heavy lift.

The Eucharistic liturgy of the Anglican tradition offers a gorgeous expression of true humility in the Prayer of Humble Access. It's an ancient prayer, rendered for us into English in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (cf. BCP 337). In my experience many, if not most, people only remember phrases like "we do not presume" and "we are not worthy" and stop listening, thinking it to be a prayer of self-abasement, which is too bad, because that's only a partial truth.

Listen again: "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies." Because, "Thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy." These are the two truths of humility.

We cannot earn God's favor by deeds of any sort, humble or otherwise. When we opt for the quick fix – I'll be rich, I'll be an influencer on Instagram, I'll get a better car, or a better house, or a better spouse – we grab the wrong end of the stick about God, and we make idols of our possessions and our deeds.

+ + +

In the turn-the-world-on-its-head style of Jesus' parables, we find that that what we do matters less than who we are. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is not about who can earn their way into an exclusive, gated, Kingdom of God. No one can; there is no such place.

This parable is about God, who continually calls everything to God's self: you and me, the people we like and the people we don't, and all of creation, day after day after day.

At the end, we return to that question that haunts all of us: "Who do you think you are?" The next time someone asks you that question, the next time you ask yourself that question or, most importantly, when Jesus asks you that question – I pray that you have grown to learn that the answer is "I am a beloved child of God, created in God's image, who is in constant need of God's mercy and grace." Period.

If you can hold together both truths of that answer in your hearts, the Son of Man, when he comes, will indeed find faith on the earth. And that, my friends in Christ, will be a great day. Amen.