

Could go either way

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Collect for Proper 25, The Book of Common Prayer, page 235

THE 23ND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (LECTIONARY: PROPER 25C)

Sirach 35:12-17, Psalm 84:1-6, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

October 23, 2016

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

When they were in college, Bill and his best friend, Melissa Burnside, who continues to be our dear friend, used to laugh at one of the worst names ever for a retail women's clothing store: Hit or Miss. Why go to a place that acknowledges there's at least a 50% chance that what they are selling is not going to work for you?

From that came a catch phrase that Melissa and Bill continue to use as shorthand to sum up any situation they are facing that has potentially dire

outcomes: "could go either way." Anything from health to work to relationships, could go either way... hit or miss.

And so it is in the parable Jesus tells in the gospel reading today about the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple – could go either way.

And yet, as is so often the case with these vexing parables Jesus tells: we all have some Pharisee and some tax collector in us. The story says the tax collector stood far off from the Pharisee, but

doesn't stand so far off within us.

Also, it is key to recall that Jesus loved – and loves – both Pharisees and tax collectors.

Remember that tax collectors were despicable (maybe deplorable?) in the culture not only because people didn't like to pay taxes in the ancient world but because the taxes were being collected for the occupying Roman Empire and shipped off there AND because the Jewish tax collectors were often enriching themselves at the expense of their own people by charging a larger percentage than they were sending to Rome – so adding insult to injury.

In the temple, the full weight of his moral and personal failure comes to the tax collector's consciousness and he lays it out in his prayer. At the same time, the parable makes clear, the Pharisee has his own failure – but the nature of it is beyond him, he's unaware that he's a “miss” as he proclaims himself a “hit.”

For me, the deeper complexity, but a reality that is all too familiar, is the parable doesn't go into what came next in the lives of these two figures. My guess is the tax collector, now trapped in the system he's given himself to, goes on collecting taxes and the Pharisee goes on grandly representing himself as the agent of God within organized religion, working hard to be righteous by his earnest efforts.

Which means, to some extent, that they had to slog on from day to day, as we often do, in living and seeking God in the midst of the lives we have – that there is not a magical exit or shortcut.

And it only really matters to the extent that we are living with our own inner tax collector and our own inner Pharisee – especially in a world that typically directs us to the way of the Pharisee, to picking ourselves up by our bootstraps and building our lives, progressing ever higher, leaving behind the “thieves, rogues, adulterers, [and] tax collector(s)” as we ascend to some greater station in life – or (in a consumer culture) at least getting the trappings that makes us *look* like we've advanced or arrived – or at the very least, resorting to technology or other “things to do, places to go, people to see” to distract us from what is deeply troubling us....

Again, Jesus loved and related to both Pharisees and tax collectors – neither was a one-dimensional stereotype to him – both were fully human....

And both in his affections and in his own life he revealed a path very different from the assumed path of climbing ever higher on the rungs of piety.

He says the tax collector went home “justified” – which is to say: loved and embraced from outside himself by God – not on the basis

of any works of “righteousness” – fulfilling the demands of the law by his own efforts.

But then, more pointedly, Jesus, in his own life, descended into betrayal, suffering and death. His pilgrimage did *not* include “every day in every way getting better and better.” His path was a continual laying aside of absolutely everything, including his own life.

And in that giving up, he entered new life, resurrection....

In his daily meditation this past week, Fr. Richard Rohr wrote: “The path of descent involves letting go of our self-image, our titles, our public image. I think this is one of the many meanings of the First Commandment: ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (Exodus 20:3). What is at stake here is not just false images of God (which mostly serve our purposes), but also comfortable images of ourselves. That’s probably what the saints meant when they said we have to move to the place of faith, to the place of self-forgetfulness, of nothingness, which ironically is the place of abundance!”

Fr. Richard quotes Carl Jung the 20th century Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, one of the founders of analytical psychology, at the end of his life saying that his pilgrimage in life: “consisted in my having to climb down a thousand ladders until I could reach out my hand to the little clod of earth that

I am.”

Fr. Richard says: “That’s a free man. We aren’t really free until we’re free from ourselves: our ego, our reputation, our self-image, our need to be right, our need to be successful, our need to have everything under control, even our need to be loved by others—or to think of ourselves as loving.”

He says: “We are earth that has come to consciousness. If we discover this power in ourselves and know that we are God’s creatures, that we come from God and return to God, that’s enough.”

Fr. Richard concludes: “It’s really that simple. If we have not experienced that connection, knowing that we are indeed a fragment of the Great Flame, we will most certainly need to accumulate more and more outer things as substitutes for self-worth. This, of course, is the great spiritual illusion. We needn’t acquire what we already have. Our value comes from our inherent participation in God.”

Our life as the baptized is acknowledging this participation in God, that we need not acquire what we already have. There is no better way to come to baptism than as an infant, as Dylan Scott Wilford does today. He reveals to us our own basic and dependent nature before God – that we do not receive God on the basis of some acquired righteousness but simply because

God is burning within us – as we can readily see if we allow grace to open our spiritual eyes. Imagine the water being poured over Dylan this day pouring over you, reminding you of God’s constant, life-giving presence.

So it isn’t, actually, hit or miss, could go either way, good or bad, pure or impure, righteous or unrighteous, special or ordinary in the way we and conventional religion have typically thought about human life and life in God.

As Fr. Richard points out: Jesus finds God among the impure as much as among the pure. God inhabits the ordinary – Jesus in typical human flesh that bleeds – and calls us to see God, grace, life in the mundane – water, bread, wine and what we’re doing on Monday morning, in our hits and misses, knowing that when things can go either way, either way, God is there – here – with us and in us.

And that is enough.



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