

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector      Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

***"Faith and Mercy Go Hand In Hand"***

A young woman went to her priest, Fr. O'Malley, and said, "Father, I have a sin that is eating away at me, and I want your help. I come to church on Sunday and I can't help thinking as I look around that I'm the prettiest girl in the whole congregation. I know I shouldn't think that, but just look around me, I can't help it. I want you to help me with this." The priest replied, "Mary, don't worry about it. In your case it's not a sin. It's just a horrible mistake!" My friends - life is not a contest

It would seem to me that the Pharisee in the Temple compared his holiness and the Tax Collectors' as a contest – in which his prayer consists of telling God about his worthiness and holiness and all of his good points while being critical and putting down the Tax Collector. Isn't it awesome that it is the faith of the Tax Collector that allows him to look directly into the heart of Almighty God and seeks His mercy through true penitence!

The Pharisee was all about show and wanted everyone to know that he was obedient to the periods of prayer that were scheduled daily to go with with the morning and evening sacrifices. But you know what – people could go to the Temple anytime for private prayer! Fasting was not commanded in the Mosaic Law – except on the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees, wanting to try to be holy, fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. Here was this proud Pharisee who wanted everyone to know that he was obedient to the custom – and was doing more than the Law required. It was all about the show!

Every word in the Pharisee's prayer is reeking with self-praise. Even the expression '*praying this to himself*' is significant. It suggests that the prayer was less addressed to God's ears than to his own, and his words could hardly be spoken directly to others, both because of their arrogant self-praise and of their disrespectful false accusation of everyone else in the world – for they appeared to sit in judgment. It was not prayer to God, but a monologue or soliloquy of his own praise, and, if you will, it was equal parts exaltation of himself and the insulting of other men. I want to suggest to you that his "prayer" never went higher than the inner roof of the temple court, and was, in a very grave sense, 'to himself alone.'

On the other hand the prayer of the Tax Collector or publican was totally different from the Pharisees'. He made no boasts about his own righteousness toward God or man. He felt and proclaimed that he was a sinner, and with true remorse, was willing to acknowledge it. I really believe that this is the kind of prayer that God finds acceptable and truthful. When we are willing to confess and repent or turn away from our sins, we find God's mercy. Listen to these true words from Proverbs 28:13 – "*He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.*" The Tax Collector was willing to do this in any place; in the presence of any one; in the midst of the multitudes of the temple, or alone in his prayer closet. He knew in his heart that "the all knowing and ever present God" was a witness of his actions. Not only was God witness to his repentance, but God was there when his sins were committed – even the ones he was most ashamed of, and because of that he was willing to confess his sins before Him. As Anglicans we don't have to do this "publicly," but we should be willing, always, to confess our many transgressions to Almighty God – either during the public confession of the Holy Eucharist, to God alone in prayer, or if you feel the need – in the presence of a priest for the Reconciliation of the Penitent, so that we may receive

forgiveness of those sins through God's infinite goodness, love, and mercy. When we have done wrong it is the most honorable thing for us to try to make amends. Just a few weeks ago I preached on God's love and forgiveness which He wants to provide to every person who repents. God does not want anyone burdened with sin – that is why He sent His son to die on the cross for us – and that invitation is open to everyone: everyone. The person who walks around with unrepented sin, who is not willing to confess it – walks around with an unnecessary burden attempting to “conceal” the fault, and then adds hypocrisy to the list.

In verse 13 of today's Holy Gospel from Luke – the verb that is used here asking for God to be merciful (*ἱλάσκομαι hilaskomai*) means to be propitiated or to make reconciliation. The Tax Collector was pleading for God's mercy for his sins and in turn fully believed that God could and would forgive him. This word referred to the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies; he was confessing his sin and his true need for forgiveness. How wonderful that we don't need a *mercy seat* for we have a cross on which Christ's blood was shed for our forgiveness. This Tax Collector was trusting in the blood that had been sprinkled on the mercy-seat for atonement. This repentant faith was more than enough - and Jesus said that "*this man went to his house justified*" or “declared righteous” before God (Luke 18:14). The Pharisee, on the other hand, who prayed “to himself,” rather than God, simply congratulating himself on his own self-righteousness, and therefore he received no forgiveness. If nothing else, he was filled with the sin of pride—perhaps the worst sin of all.

Regarding pride – the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once said “The proud man counts his newspaper clippings—the humble man his blessings. This made me look for other's opinions on self praise and pride and I found these illustrations:

- “The best remedy for conceit is to sit down and make a list of all the things you don't know.”
- “You don't have to be much of a musician to toot your own horn.”
- “People who sing their own praises do so *without* accompaniment.”
- “You cannot spell sin or pride without *I* being in the middle.”

Jesus was very clear about people wearing their pride and self-righteousness on their sleeves, looking down at others and proclaiming to others that they are the ones that have it right – and that everyone else needs to get with their program. In Matthew 7 Jesus tells the crowd "*Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*" (Matthew 7:3-5) We need to do our own self inspection before we question the righteousness of others – we need to do a “checkup from the neck up!” We need to do a self inventory about our righteousness, our holiness compared to God's. How humbling is that? This Pharisee was putting on a show for the others and proclaiming that he was grateful that he was not like others, when in fact he was probably worse than the others – because of his self-righteousness. He gave thanksgiving to God – but let me ask you - was it gratitude? He proclaimed his excellences that he has performed – but where is the humility? We once again visit the church of “I, Me, Mine!” This Pharisee had his own pew – right up front in the Church of “I, Me, Mine!” For the Tax Collector there is wholehearted remorse—but not despair. He never lost hope. There is an appeal to His mercy. This quote was taken from the magazine “*Guideposts*” “God wisely designed the human body so that we can neither pat our own backs nor kick ourselves too easily.”

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Let's not lose sight of the fact that the Pharisee was a pious and holy man, living for all we can tell, an honest and upright life. He did more than the law required. He gave tithes of all his income and not just of the required parts. But he *stood up* in a prominent place to pray, he commended himself for his piety (his prayer is all about 'I'), he despised his neighbors and he suggested to Almighty God that there was nothing he needed. On the other hand, the Tax Collector was so humble that he did not dare lift up his eyes, let alone his hands, to God in prayer, but simply poured out a confession of his sinfulness and appealed for God's mercy. Jesus' verdict was that he went home *justified*, i.e. accepted by God, but the Pharisee was not accepted at all. God is always ready to receive the unrighteous when they call to him in FAITH, but he closes his ears to those whose pride in their religious practices and good works makes them feel self-sufficient.

There were undoubtedly many good, well-meaning Pharisees, and therefore it is wrong to lump them all together and condemn them. But it is also true that there were people just like the Pharisee that Jesus spoke about, and they probably prayed prayers very similar to his.

The common denominator that Jesus reminds us of is faith. In our Confirmation class – I teach that the definition of faith is: “trusting in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all things and in all circumstances.” How many times have we read in the Gospels of Jesus telling people “*your faith has healed you*” or “*your faith has made you well?*”

I am reminded of the account of the man who couldn't get in the house to meet with Jesus. When we visited the ancient ruins of Qatzrin (*Katzreen*) in the Golan Heights in 1999, there was a restored home and we could all see the type of roof and ceiling that these men cut through for their friend to see Jesus and be healed. It truly made these words come alive: "*And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."* (Mark 2:3-5) The man, because of his faith and the faith of his friends, took up his mat and by the grace of Almighty God – he walked. Jesus affirms that prayers are indeed answered.

Jesus wants all of us to be *childlike* but not *childish*. An unspoiled child illustrates humility, faith, and dependence. A child has a sense of wonder that makes life new and exciting. The only way to enter God's kingdom is to become like a child and be born again (John 3). If the proud Pharisee had only become like a child, he too would have gone home justified. If he had had the faith, like a child – he would have received God's mercy. Faith and Mercy go hand in hand! However – faith does not require us to “do anything” to be saved – except believe! What was that definition of faith again? Faith is “trusting in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all things and in all circumstances.” The Apostle Paul wrote to the people of Ephesus – and he wrote to us today: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In closing, I want to share with you my graduating class' (Trinity School for Ministry Class of 2005) special Scripture verse - which indeed contains all of our “marching orders” taken from the Prophet Micah: “*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8) Indeed - Faith and Mercy go hand in hand! Thank you Jesus.