

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, October 23, 2022

Luke 16:19-31

This Gospel lesson for today seems pretty simple. We are supposed to be humble, and not stand up trumpeting all the holy things we do to make ourselves righteous, to get into heaven, to be ever so superior to other people.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that I thank God for how humble I am! I think God that I am not like others, such as that self-righteous Pharisee proclaiming all the pious things that he does. I thank God that I am not like those people over there.

Is that the point of the parable? Are we supposed to be that way? No?

Well then, let's get a couple of details out of the way.

First of all, this passage, along with many others in the Gospels of Luke, Matthew and John, criticizes the pharisees of Jesus's day. Fair enough. But too often, the passages' criticism of the pharisees has been interpreted as criticism of the Jewish people, and of Judaism in general.

Too often, passages like this have been used to lift ourselves up in self-congratulation: "We should thank God that we are ever so enlightened; that we are ever so superior to people of other religions, like those Jewish people. They are so legalistic and rigid and self-righteous. they depend on their own works to save them. We, by contrast have Jesus in our hearts!

It goes even farther though, doesn't it. Because indeed, you have to keep an eye on those Jews, They have a disproportionate representation in the highest levels of

academics, research, and medicine and business. Surely this cannot be because of their determined fixation on education and dedication to family and willingness to work. Surely, instead it must be because of an international conspiracy of Jewish people trying to take over the world.

Sounds silly, doesn't it. Well it would be, if these interpretations had not already killed millions of Jews. Can you hear the hiss in it, the hiss of the snake? This is not just silly, it's stupid. It not just stupid. It's evil.

Certainly, some Jewish people are legalistic and rigid and self-righteous. So are some Christians. Many Jewish people are good hearted and compassionate and flexible and try to do the right thing. Many Christians are the same. We are not that different.

Jews and Christians respectfully disagree about Jesus. Jews think Jesus was a teacher. Christians think that, in addition to being a teacher, Jesus is the embodiment of God's presence on earth; that he is divine. This is a fundamental disagreement, but it is a respectful disagreement.

When Jesus criticizes the Pharisees, he is criticizing those in the religious leadership of his day who stand against his insistence that people on the edge of society be welcomed into the community, that the concerns of the poor be honored, and that the journey of the cross is the path of life.

Nowadays, Jesus continues to criticize Christian leaders for the same reason, because they stand in the against of his insistence that people on the edge of society be welcomed into the community, that the concerns of the poor be honored, that the journey of the cross is the path of life.

Jesus is criticizing the religious leaders, not the Jewish people.

In fact, Jesus was a good Jew. His teaching is consistent with the Jewish teaching of his day. He observed Jewish tradition. His family observed Jewish tradition. He only broke with tradition when he had to, for the sake of human wholeness.

Now, about this tax collector. He comes into the temple and says, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

This does not mean we are supposed to hate ourselves all the time. God loves us. God wants us to love others as well as God, others and creation. Self-hatred can be a mental condition where the structures and chemistry in our brain make us feel bad. Doesn't mean we are bad, but it makes us feel bad.

Sometimes the messages we receive from society reinforce this self-hatred---that we have to be this particular body type or have this particular amount of money or this particular kind of family or this particular age, in order to be real people.

No, the tax collector in the Gospel lesson for today is not asking for forgiveness because he feels bad about himself. He asks for forgiveness because he does bad things.

Tax collectors in Jesus' day were part of an economic and political system that funneled most of the wealth in society up to the very top, to a very few people: the Roman emperor and his crowd. The rest of the people in the empire could starve for all they cared, as long as they didn't rebel.

So, to put it bluntly, this tax collector starved children. He did bad things.

Nowadays, to the degree that we participate in our economic and political system, in which we do business and make money and vote, without regarding the concerns of people who are poor and children who are starving, we do bad things. This is not just the economic and political system in the United States either, because our economic system is not limited to the United States, but stretches across the globe. To the extent that we participate in our economic system and vote without regard to the needs of people who are poor, children without enough food worldwide, to that degree, we do bad things too.

Of course, sin is not limited to economic and political evils. When we are addicted and we are too proud to seek help. When we are wrong and too proud to admit it. When we taken advantage of and too afraid to see it, we do bad things. We hurt ourselves, other people and this creation that God loves.

So, what's the first thing we do when we begin to worship here? We call on God, then we kneel down in body or in spirit, and we ask for mercy. Lord, have mercy. That's the first thing we do. That's who we are.

Here's the good news. God does have mercy. In Jesus at the cross, God comes to us and turns us around again and again, every day. This is the journey of Baptism, the journey of the cross, the journey of hope. God loves us so much that God died to save us, even though we do bad things. God loves us so much that Jesus lives among us, even though we do bad things.

So, we try to do good things. We may give money, like this Pharisee. That's a good thing. We may fast, like the Pharisee. That's a way to feel closer to God. We may work for refugees, or to feed people who are hungry. We tell the truth, do business with integrity, love our neighbor, not in order to get God to love us, not in order to be righteous, not in order to get into heaven, but rather because God loves us already, because Jesus has made us righteous already, because we are going to heaven already.

Thanks be to God.