

PENTECOST PROPER 25 C 2010

So there I sit, in my study at home, reading this morning's Gospel lesson and thinking, "Can you believe that Pharisee? Patting himself on the back for his piety, and lauding it over people he thinks are beneath him. I hate it when religious leaders play 'holier than thou.' Thank God I am not like them." Oops. I guess that's kinda like saying "the really great thing about me is that I am so humble."

We all prefer to identify with the tax collector in this morning's parable who realizes that he is a sinner and therefore seek's God's mercy. And we know better than to identify with the self-aggrandizing Pharisee. But if we are honest, it won't take us long to remember times when we have compared ourselves favorably to other Christians, or have felt superior to someone sitting in the next pew.

The clear message of this morning's Gospel lesson is that in order to get right with God we have to humble ourselves. We have to own up to our shortcomings, and acknowledge the huge gulf between what we profess and what we do. To be counted among the righteous, we have to acknowledge our *unrighteousness*. Breast-beating may not be necessary – I kinda think that the tax collector in the parable is a bit of a drama queen – but genuine contrition *is* required.

What, then, are we to make of the Apostle Paul as he is presented in the Second Letter to Timothy. As the end of his life nears, Paul almost seems to be boasting. "I have fought the good fight," he says. "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day." Is Paul being arrogant? Smug? Self-promoting? Or is he simply speaking the truth? How is he any different than the Pharisee in the parable who boasts about how well *he* has kept the faith?

This is a genuine question, given that Paul is held up for our approval by the authors of the Epistle whereas the religious leader in the parable is offered as an example of how *not* to be. And indeed, I find the words attributed to Paul comforting and inspiring, a powerful example of discipleship and of confidence in God's promise of salvation. So then, what *is* the difference between Paul, who is

himself a Pharisee, and the Pharisee depicted in the parable? What is it that makes the Paul admirable and his counterpart so unattractive?

The most obvious difference is that the Pharisee in the parable goes around comparing himself to others whereas Paul speaks only of himself. When we compare ourselves to others we almost always get into spiritual trouble. Doing so is dangerous no matter where we come out on the comparison. If we say “I could never be as dedicated as Joe is, or as articulate as Mary, or as faithful as Sam,” we run the risk of overlooking or undervaluing the perhaps different gifts that God has entrusted to *us*. And when we fail to recognize and honor that which we have been given, we fail to see how present God is in our lives and how much - “Godness” we have to share. On the other hand, if we say “Thank God I’m better off than Joe, Mary or Sam,” ... well we know how that goes.

Comparing ourselves to others is often spiritually dangerous. But that does not mean that so long as we confine ourselves to addressing our own virtues and demerits, we can never go wrong. I’m pretty sure that Jesus would not have been too thrilled if instead of saying “thank God I am not like them” the Pharisee in the parable had simply exclaimed “thank God I am so fabulous.” Especially if his sole motivation was self-adoration.

To be sure, Paul kind of said “Thank God I am so fabulous,” but he was not engaged in the celebration of the self. Rather, he was seeking to comfort the members of the fledgling church, and to urge them to not lose heart. Writing from a prison cell and with his life likely near the end, he sought to speak a word of assurance to those who feared that he had been beaten down and had lost his faith. Or that his confinement for spreading the Gospel meant that God’s promises, in particular the promise of salvation, would not be fulfilled.

A third difference between Paul and his fellow Pharisee is that he takes no credit for his strengths or his accomplishments, but instead gives all the credit to God. He understands himself to be the Lord’s instrument, and to have been given a particular set of gifts – perseverance, fortitude, faithfulness, and the ability to write a good letter – given these gifts by God ... for the Glory of God. “[T]he Lord stood by me,” he says, “and gave me strength, so that *through* me the message

might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. [It is for this reason that] I was rescued from the lion's mouth.”

Finally, Paul does not seek to single himself out, but recognizes that the “crown of righteousness” on the day of the Lord’s coming is not for him alone, “but [is] also [for] all who long for Christ’s [return].” He recognizes that the salvation in which he is confident is not the result of his fighting spirit or steady faith, but is instead a pure gift from God, in and through Christ Jesus at Calvary.

So, then, the point of this morning’s Gospel lesson is not that we should hide our gifts or shrink from our accomplishments or from our good fortune. Like Paul, we should acknowledge and honor them, so that we can become good stewards of them. The difference between boasting and treasuring, between being smug and being grateful, between being self-aggrandizing and self-effacing is recognizing that everything is a gift from God, and that nothing is deserved. Whatever gifts we possess – courage, confidence, curiosity, humility, creativity, delight in the creativity of others, patience, holy *impatience*, steadfastness, the ability to function under stress, a loving heart, a playful disposition, the ability to handle uncertainty and to live with ambiguity, strength of heart, agility of mind, soundness of body, soundness of spirit, equanimity in the face of physical or mental decline, faith, hope, material well-being, financial security – these are all gifts from God. As is life itself. These gifts are not ours to squander. And they are not ours to hoard. Like Paul we should use them for the Glory of the Lord. Our gifts are given to us in trust, so that we might be agents of God’s work in the world and instruments of God’s peace. Individually, and as members of the body of Christ.

In the next few weeks, you will be encouraged to be especially intentional about how you use the gifts that God has given to you in trust, in particular the gifts of time, talent, and treasure. These are not ours to hoard. They are to be used for the Glory of God. Individually, and collectively as that particular manifestation of the body of Christ known as St. Ann’s Old Lyme. As you ponder these things, may you be mindful of that which we profess every Sunday during the Offertory: “All things come of the O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” Amen.