

Year C Pentecost 20  
Joel 2:23-32  
Psalm 65  
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18  
Luke 18:9-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

In Jesus's parable today we see him turning general perceptions upside down once again. The Pharisee, remember, would have belonged to one of the most highly respected sects of Judaism during that time. He would have kept all the laws very strictly, and spent a lot of his time fasting, praying, and studying the scriptures. As he tells God, he would also have given ten percent of his income to the temple. His standing in the community would have been very high, and he might have been greatly admired. On the other hand, the tax collector would have been a collaborator with the oppressive Roman occupation of Jerusalem, since he collected taxes for the Roman empire. Not only that, but many tax collectors collected more than was due, and then pocketed the extra themselves. They were considered to be some of the most despicable, most reviled people in the Jewish community.

And yet Jesus says that the tax collector "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." This reminds me of a couple of people I ministered to a few years ago. A man was in the cardiac ICU at WMC, getting ready for a quadruple bypass. His nurse said the man was a pastor from the Midwest, who had suffered a heart attack while he was here on vacation, and might appreciate it if I stopped in to see him before his surgery. Seeing that he had no visitors at the time, I did stop by to meet him and say hello. When he learned that I was one of the hospital chaplains, he said, "well isn't that sweet! Well dear, I'm happy to meet you, and I'll be sure to say a prayer for you, but I don't need anything, bless your heart! I've got my Bible right here, and if I die during this surgery, I know I'm going straight to heaven, praise Jesus. Some of the other people in these rooms probably need you a lot more than I do, so I'll just let you go help them."

Later that afternoon I saw another patient in that unit, who also thought he didn't need to see me, but for exactly the opposite reason. "I'm not worth your time," he said, refusing to look at me. It took a few minutes, but he eventually explained, "I've been selling drugs since I was twelve years old. I've used just about everything you've probably ever heard of, and I've stolen from everybody, to keep using, even my grandma. They're giving me a new heart valve tomorrow because the drugs ruined mine." This man was twenty-seven years old. "And why do you say that you're not worth my time?" I asked. "Because Jesus don't love ME," he said simply. "Jesus CAN'T love me."

The contrast in the attitudes of these men couldn't have been more dramatic, and I submit to you that the young man with the drug addiction was more likely to be "right with God" than the pastor was that day. Remember, Jesus tells his parable to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." How often do we do this? How often do we assume that because we go to church, or work to fight injustice, or because we give to charity, or volunteer in the community, that we are better than other people? But all of us are broken in some way—as Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." We are all recovering sinners, if you will. So Jesus wants us to depend on God, God's love, God's grace and God's forgiveness, not our own righteousness.

To do that we have to admit that we have sinned, and then we have to repent. Sometimes it can be hard to do that because our culture has pathologized a lot of sin—that is to say we've decided it's better to say that people are sick these days, rather than saying that they're sinning. To say that people do the bad things they do because of mental illness, or addiction, or whatever, to excuse it. But that doesn't excuse it, and if, as a result, we think we have no responsibility for the evil that we do, it makes it harder for us to recognize it, and to repent of it. Harder for us to turn away from the evil. But God understands our brokenness, and understands our tendency to fool ourselves. Fortunately, Jesus said he came into the world to save sinners, and he wants us to come before him

with humility, not with self-righteousness. When we do that, when we come asking humbly for forgiveness, God will always forgive.

That's not so say that we don't need to worry about what we do, because Jesus will always forgive us. No. When I was in high school, one of my classmates said he didn't worry much about sinning, because he always went to confession on Friday afternoons, said his Hail Marys and Our Fathers and was good to go for another week. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about introspection, about looking inside ourselves and being honest with ourselves when we have sinned, and then turning to God humbly—then changing our behavior. Amendment of life is what the prayerbook says. Real effort to stop the sinful behavior, and to do better.

When we do this, Jesus says we will “be exalted.” That can mean powerful and prestigious, but it can also mean joyful, ecstatic, blissful and exuberant. So let's come humbly before the Lord, repent, so that we can be joyful.  
Amen.