

Sermon

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, 2016

Good Shepherd, Charlestown; Trinity Anglican Church, White River Junction, Vermont

Let us Pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son our Lord. Amen.

Have you ever wondered what God will find here on earth? Or, more specifically, have you ever wondered about this particular phrase, the one Jesus speaks, the one that is recorded in the Gospel, this one: “When the Son of man comes, do you think he will find faith on earth?” Ever wondered about that? Well, St. Augustine did. So do I. And so do most of us.

I suspect even the Pharisee and the tax Collector wondered about what the Son of man would find here on earth. And they both had an answer. Their answers were clear and full of conviction. They knew why they prayed. They knew how to pray. They prayed often. How is it that one of them got it so wrong? How is it that Jesus proclaimed that one was justified, while the other was not?

Just over a week ago, Ljuba and I found ourselves at Santiago de Compostela. It is a place of pilgrimage. Many faithful pilgrims walk the many miles necessary to reach the holy site. And there are many routes to get there. The French route is one of the longer journeys. The so-called “English route” is considered the shortest. But there are others. Those who have made the trip often will have a

little booklet that is stamped with the various locations the Pilgrims passed through.

On the second day we were in Santiago, Ljuba and I shopped in one of the many souvenir stands that lines the streets that radiate out from the central square. I was of the mind to buy some miniature replicas of the great thurible, the famous “pota fumera.” With my hands full of pots of fumera, I approached the cash register. The clerk gave my dozen replicas barely a glance as she rang up the sale. Everybody, she seemed to suggest, buys pots of fumera in Santiago de Campostela.

As we were making our transaction complete, a young man approached us. He was attracted by our American accents and seemed eager to talk American once again. We discovered he was from San Francisco and had just completed his pilgrimage. He proudly showed us his completed booklet, replete with all the required stamps. He noted that he had traveled by the arduous French route, completing the last leg of his journey by walking thirty kilometers in one day. He offered that it almost killed him. “Well,” I said, “you could have chosen the English route.” He gave me a look that said, “that route is for wimps.”

I told him I was very moved by the fact that he had made such a sacrifice for his faith. He paused and looked a little surprised. “Some people do it as an act of faith,” he told me. My turn to pause. Then I asked: “and you? Why did you do it?” “For the sense of accomplishment,” he told me proudly. “Bragging rights are necessary.” Bragging rights are necessary.

I hadn't expected to meet the Pharisee outside the Temple, but there he was. I began to wonder about this Pilgrim and, even more about the Pharisee in today's gospel. He would no doubt make his pilgrimage. He would get his booklet stamped at each station on his way to heaven. He would proudly present that booklet to God and say: "Here, my Lord. This proves my capability. This proves I have earned my way into heaven. And what is more, during my journey here, I passed many who had fallen by the wayside. They hadn't the strength or the will to complete their pilgrimage."

Perhaps one of those who our Pharisee passed on his journey to heaven, was a tax collector. He set out on his pilgrimage to please God. He earnestly wanted to do the right thing, to follow God's plan, to keep on the path and fulfill his promises to God. But on his long journey, he kept falling. His strength was simply not up to the task. And he knew this. And he knew that God knew it as well. And he prayed for strength and forgiveness and for the strength to continue.

This may be another way of telling the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. But there are many other ways as well. It is the Pharisee who tells God how good he has been. He dictates his own report card. He gives himself an A+. It is the tax collector who knows that it is God alone who will issue any report card. It is God alone who will offer judgments on our souls.

It is interesting indeed that Jesus does not condemn the Pharisee unduly. He simply says that "he that exalteth himself shall be abased." Lowered in rank. Humbled.

But this passage, as are so many in Scripture, is about having a right relationship to God. The Pharisee seems to have things worked out; he seems to believe he understands the mind of God. That God wants specific actions. That may be true as far as it goes. But God wants us, above all, to have a right relationship to Him.

And having a right relationship to God means we also have a right relationship with others. It is remarkable how much psychology has taken from Holy Scripture, perhaps without even knowing it. Healthy people, psychologists tell us, care for others, don't carry around inflated egos and make reasonable assessments about their strengths and weaknesses, seeking to improve and grow spiritually. Well, guess what: St. Luke reports that God wants us to do likewise.

Do we condemn the Pharisee for his behavior? Be careful. God doesn't. He simply reports the truth of a situation. God loves the Pharisee and hopes that he will find it in his heart to love God and love his neighbor as himself.

Schopenhauer, the great philosopher not known for his Christian faith, once wrote: "when you come in contact with a man...fix your attention upon his suffering, needs, anxieties, pain. Then you will always feel kinship with him." Not bad for an atheist. But let me complete this thought. "When you come in contact with God, fix your attention on his enormous love for you, for his constant care and concern for growth in love for others, for your compassion and for your faith." I suspect Arthur Schopenhauer may well thank me for my concern.

And as for Santiago de Compostela, if I ever choose to take my pilgrimage, I may very well take the English route. And I beg God to forgive me.

Amen.