

Two men come to the temple to pray. The first is a Pharisee, who we tend to think of as bad given all the encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees. However, we need to remember that to those who were listening to Jesus that they were the religious leaders, who were considered righteous. This Pharisee really is righteous. He is doing his best. He gives generously to the church and fasts twice a week. He is one of the faithful. He is the one who comes to church every week, who is diligent about his prayer life, and who participates in the ministries of the church. He is a lot like us who are here in church today.

The other man who comes to pray is a tax collector – the worst of the worst. Tax collectors collected taxes for the Romans, the conquerors, and were expected to cheat the people they were collecting from to make money. This man did not most likely come to church (temple) every week. He would have been rejected by the others who were there. He is the crooked businessman who no one trusts. He is the co-worker who takes credit for your work. He is the one who steals from the poor.

The first man, the Pharisee, prays a prayer that is mostly about how good he is especially in comparison to other man who is also there to pray. He tells God of all the good he has done. He declares that he so much better than that tax collector who is there with him.

The second man, the tax collector, also prays, but has no good deeds to declare to God. He does not even try to compare himself to the other man. Instead, he begs for mercy. He beats his breast. He has come to a point when he must declare his sins before God.

And who does Jesus say is justified? The second man, the tax collector, the worst of the worst, the cheater, the swindler! **Wait a moment now Jesus!** As folk who come to church, and are doing our best to live as Christians following the ways of that Jesus taught us, this parable from Jesus is frustrating. We might say - I'm working hard to proclaim the kingdom of God in my words and actions. Why does this tax collector, this obvious sinner, get a pass or even commended just because he said he was sorry? He hasn't done the work. I'm the good one here. And yes you are. You are the good ones or at least trying to be the good ones. You say your prayers. You give to the church. You feed the poor, visit the sick, and help others.

And so here is the trap that Jesus is warning us about. Often, we are so aware of our good deeds and proud of how we are trying to live that we forget that we are still in need of God's mercy – the same mercy the tax collector is begging for. We compare ourselves to the others we think we are doing better than and forget to ask for the mercy we too need. We get caught up in judging the other and even tearing them down forgetting that we all stand in the same place – in need of God's mercy.

I wonder how all of our ministry – our good deeds – will change if we approach those we are trying to help knowing that we all stand in the same place rather than being better than the other. Instead of standing from afar and saying, “I’m so glad I’m not like them. Boy did they mess up their lives,” what happens if we stand next to them knowing that we too need God’s mercy?

Of course, this is exactly not what the world teaches us to do. We are taught to tear down those in the wrong, to separate ourselves from them, and to push them away. Now don’t get me wrong. Doing wrong brings consequences and needs consequences. But how we approach the other who is in that desperate place is important. It is important to not stand against them but alongside them. The same mercy God has for us, we are asked to have for one another. We stand in need of mercy with all the others who stand in need in mercy.

The following story that comes to mind where I was in awe of the mercy one person showed to the other. It was before I was ordained. I was on the vestry at church and aware of happenings in the Diocese and other churches nearby. One day we got the news that the priest at a nearby church had been arrested for selling cocaine. This was shocking and there was much condemnation and talking. The priest had gotten addicted to cocaine and to support his habit, he had turned to selling the drug, He was let out on bail and from what I understood, no one wanted anything to do with him. His congregation was very hurt and understandably, he was no longer able to serve as a priest.

I will never forget the actions of my rector at the time. He did not reject this man. When he got out of jail on bail, he contacted him. He went with him to Narcotic Anonymous meetings. He invited him to worship with us which is where I met the man. And my rector was clear with us that we needed to show mercy. What the priest did was wrong and there had to be repercussions, but he also was in need of mercy and my rector, who was a recovering alcoholic, was very aware of the need for mercy.

It is easy for us to stand in the shoes of the Pharisee and say I am not like that person over there. Look at how bad they have been, I can’t believe it. They deserve everything they got. But Jesus reorients us to remember that instead of looking at what others are doing, instead start with our situation –our hurt, our weak places, our need of mercy. From there, go forth to encounter others in their times of despair. Encounter them knowing that you stand in the same place that you do when it comes to needing God’s mercy.

Be with them. Love them. Help as you can. But most of all do not judge them. We all stand in need of the mercy of God.