

20th Sunday After Pentecost, Year C

23 October 2022

Luke 18:9-14

A friend of mine is a great theological thinker and a lifelong Anglican. Over some years, I have been blessed by her insights on our tradition; why it is that we Anglicans do what we do. For instance, she beautifully describes the liturgy as something to be inhabited. We find ourselves at home in it each and every Sunday. How lovely. Furthermore, she has shared how her feelings on the Confession have changed over time.

Frankly, she did not particularly enjoy the Confession for many years. Maybe you feel the same way. It's not uplifting to hear on a weekly basis that we have failed, or that we are all sinners. It is particularly discouraging to hear this when we have been trying our best; giving of ourselves sacrificially for the sake of the Gospel. The Confession can be a bit of a downer.

Friends, I hate to break it to you, but our weekly practise of verbal confession does not make our situation in sin any more or less true. The nefarious thing about sin is that we do it, even when we don't intend to. We exist in the world, in systems where we do not always see how our actions cause the fence to fall on someone else. ***We confess that we have sinned against you, in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.*** This was really brought home for me when in April of 2013 the eight-storey Rana Plaza collapsed in Bangladesh. 1,135 Bangladeshi garment workers were killed and 2,500 more were injured. Joe Fresh clothing was found in the rubble, and a year after the fact, the retailer's parent company Loblaw said that the clothing line continued to be produced in that same plaza. It's no secret that many of our garments are produced in places where people are underpaid and work in unsafe environments. And yet, for the sake of style and affordability, I have bought Joe Fresh. I have participated in an economy that is unjust. Nothing else that I do for good makes this less true.

Returning to my friend, the Anglican theologian: what she realized over many years of confessing, even when she did not feel like it, was thinking that we have it all figure out, that we have acted rightly, puts us in the same place as the Pharisee in the temple. We become those who trust in ourselves, believing that we are righteous.

The parable that Jesus shares this morning should erode any sense of trust in ourselves to become righteous. Both men come to the temple having sinned, but the Pharisees demonstrates by his words his erroneous belief that they way that he lives his life makes him clean, or right before God. The Lord is the only one with clean hands in this story. It is only out of his righteousness that these men, and that we can be restored.

Do not forget: our works will never make us righteous. This may sound bleak, but it is actually very good news. You need not feel encumbered by a drive to try harder by your works. Let go of that. Instead, remember that faith receives. God alone is righteous. In faith we receive the

righteousness of God and *this* is what transforms us. Sure, we fast and we tithe as the Pharisee says that he does, but not because we desire to make ourselves right before God; these acts are a response born out of receiving his righteousness.

As I have shared in the past, for several years before entering seminary, I worked for the Salvation Army in Regent Park. God's work in redeeming people is so evident in this community. I have often wondered if this is because, like the tax collector in the temple, most people in Regent Park do not have the luxury of their sin being secretive or hidden. Their shortcomings are really out there. Tax collectors were notoriously dishonest with money, extorting funds for the sake of their own survival. My neighbours and friends suffered with addiction, carried out public acts of violence, dealt drugs, and struggled to parent well, all with the same striving for survival. Often when invited to come to church, people would respond by saying, "I believe in God, but I can't come to church...the building would burn up if I darkened the door," (As an aside, I always found this image an interesting one as God's presence in Scripture often comes in the form of fire, as if they are accidentally saying that God is with them, which of course is true). They felt this sense of unworthiness because they understood what it meant to stand in the presence of goodness itself; how it exposes us for who we are. Just so, the tax collector in the parable stands far off. In humility, he understands his need for God's mercy, that is, to withhold that which he deserves.

God can do a lot with humility. God does not wish for us to be humble so that we feel badly about ourselves. Guilt is not a feeling that comes from the Lord. It is totally unhelpful. Rather, God wishes for us to be humble so that he can lift us up: "all who humble themselves will be exalted". We cannot do this for ourselves; only He can. Humility erases our trust in ourselves, so that we can move on to something better; that is, trust in God. We trust that he will redeem us and clothe us in his righteousness.

One of the reasons that we practise confession together each week is to live this out: humbling ourselves so that we may be exalted. And we are exalted here each week; what follows our confession is tangible reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. We approach the gifts that he gives having been made worthy to do so in him. We are not shamed or made to feel guilty for our shortcomings, but instead we are restored and made worthy to stand before this table. Approach this place with confidence this morning, not in yourself, but in him who loves you, and so exalts you. Amen.