

Going Home Justified
October 24, 2010
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The Word of God for the People of God

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

¹³"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

¹⁴"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This is the World of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

God, we are far too often influenced by what others think of us. We are always pretending to be either richer or smarter or nicer than we really are. Please prevent us from trying to attract attention. Don't let us gloat over praise on one hand or be discouraged by criticism on the other. Nor let us waste time weaving imaginary situations in which the most heroic, charming, and witty person present is ourselves. Show us how to be humble of heart, like you. Let the meditations of our hearts, our actions in deed and the words of our lips be pleasing and honorable to you today. In the name of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<http://bullyinglte.wordpress.com/>

I believe that within the world we live in today you would be hard pressed to find anyone who has not been the victim of bullying in some form or fashion. Regardless of the nature of that bullying; be it because of one's ethnicity, religious affiliation, body style, gender or sexual orientation, all of us at one time or another has been the victim of bullying. Some forms of bullying are subtle, "the targets themselves do not know for a long time they are being bullied

because the bullying acts are done slowly and carefully behind their backs in the form of preconceived judgments and stereotyping. That is, the so-called target or "frog" is slowly boiled so it will not jump out of the hot water before it is too late.” (<http://ezinearticles.com/?Bullying--Twenty-Basic-Traits-of-the-Subtle-and-Not-So-Subtle-Serial-Forms-of-It&id=2659108>)

Then there is the bullying that is not so subtle, the kind where the victimizer is very open about the nature of their discontent. This kind of bullying heard in the harmful words of those who pelt rocks at their classmates on the playground and in the actions of those who protest pride parades and the funerals of fallen soldiers. With the explosion of modern communication technology, the problem has become even more infectious, as young and old alike use their websites, face book pages and video technology to denounce the value of others in order to raise their own sense of self worth and piety.

Today's reading touches on this very subject. Though maybe not obvious to the reader at first, we encounter here in the lines of Luke chapter 18 a parable about two men who go up to the temple to pray. Jesus tells a wonderful story about a very religious, self-righteous person who looked at others with contempt. In his disdain for those he considered unworthy, he had become a kind of spiritual bully.

The hardest part of this to digest, I think, is that the Pharisee in our reading today would have been revered amongst those gathered at the temple. To the people of Jesus' day, a Pharisee was the “*be all end all*” when it came to the religious authorities. They held the respect of the people and were admired for their commitment to the Law. They were a model for others to aspire to and our Pharisee in our reading today knew this; it had become the focus of his life. The Pharisee, in all his knowledge and good intentions had allowed his position and his *good* life to

take precedence over the one he served; he had allowed God to become second only to himself and now he stood in the temple reminding God of how fortunate God was to have him in the service of God's kingdom.

You ever know anyone that likes to talk about themselves? How wonderful they are and how much they have accomplished? Some do so with such poise that they truly are intriguing and we can't help but be held in suspense as they continue to tell of all they have accomplished, seen and done. Others, however, aren't quite so eloquent and we are left with our own discount after each and every encounter with them. Our Pharisee would have been the former, the one who people applauded and listen to intently; holding onto each and every word as he prayed in the temple. But what kind of lesson were the people learning from him? Listen again to what the Pharisee spoke in verse 11, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector." His words gave those around him permission to marginalize those perceived as less than. If someone doesn't fit your mold, then thank God for the blessing that you are not like them; this is the lesson that the Pharisee was teaching those who gathered to hear him pray.

Though his prayer may have been pleasing to those around him, it was not pleasing to God. In contrast, however, there is the tax collector whose prayer I am sure went unheard by most of those around him. With the tax collector there is no pretence, no fancy words or reminders of his greatness. He knows who he is. Not in his own eyes, but in the eyes of God. He is so stricken with grief by the life that he has lead that he cannot bear to look up as he prayed. Verse 13 reads, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" In looking down, he expresses a self awareness of his inability to define his own self worth by his actions alone and

his words equally express his awareness of whom and what he is – a sinner. He knows that it is God’s mercy he needs. The tax collector has become broken in spirit, possibly as the result of the victimization he has experienced at the hands of those, like the Pharisee, who have repeatedly drawn into question his very self worth time and time again.

If there is hope, it will come from beyond himself and so he gains the righteousness of God through by verbalizing so passionately the awareness that each of us ourselves must come to know if we too are to be justified before God. “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The tax collector was saved, if you will, not by what he had done for God or by his awareness alone. His awareness of the need of God in his life were accompanied by the words he spoke with a broken heart as he beat his chest, a physical manifestation of the pain he had come to know inside as a result of the absence of God in his life. The words the tax collector are so simple and are needed to said by so many of us here today and within our community at large; “God”—The prayer addressed the Creator, the One who could do something about his need. “Be merciful”—The prayer made the right request, a request not for the ability to do it on his own or to have the strength to carry on as he had, but the request to be given that which he did not deserve, God’s mercy. “To me a sinner”—The prayer made the right confession, the confession that he, like us, are not worthy of the love of God in our lives, not because of what man says about us, but because of our own actions against God and our own desire to live outside of relationship with our Creator.

It’s a simple prayer and one that is personal, only seven words in the English language, yet they are very powerful words. No one has the right to tell you that you are less than, everyone has value and worth. You must also realize, however, that when I say this I don’t mean the kind of value and worth that is defined by the world’s standards, but rather in the standard by

which we should all be measured and that unit of measure is love; the measure of God. 1 John 4:8 teaches us that “God is Love!” As we paraded down the streets of Atlanta a couple of weekends ago, sharing the love of God to the LGBTQ Population and all those who gathered to support our community, we were bombarded and yes, bullied, periodically by those who claimed to be God’s people with rants of hate and discontent. “You’re an abomination! You’re going to hell!” All this judgment and confusion spewed out of the mouths of the same individuals who claimed to know and love God. But where was the love? Where was God in all of this? The presence of God marched with us and God’s love shone brightly within the light of each individual who showered the discontent of those who we have yecept to be haters with chants of, “One God, One Love! One God, One Love.” Though the chant began with New Day, it reached the crowd with acceptance and soon the crowd, made up of various faiths, various orientations and understandings of our Creator, joined in and if for just a moment, we were united by the resounding words of 1 John 4:8, “God is love.”

But don’t get excited just yet, because many of us are guilty of the same thing. We lift ourselves up by holding down others just as much and if we don’t drop our heads before God and ask for his mercy, then we, like the Pharisee, will also leave without being justified before God. It *isn’t* about who has the most or who is the greatest amongst us. It *is* about our awareness of the need of God’s mercy in our lives and the confession that we, regardless of what we know or what we have done are all sinners in the eyes of God. But that justification is just a few simple words away for us today. If we, with a repent heart, call on the One who Created us all, make the right request and make the right confession, that is, “God have mercy of me, a sinner,” can lead us all – straight, gay, black, white, fat, skinny, tall, short, drop dead sexy gorgeous and plain Jane alike – to a road that leads us home, justified before God.

So I invite each of you today to put yourself aside; to forget about the world for just a moment, to stop marginalizing those around you and to drop your head before your God today and ask for the mercy that will lead you home. With every head bowed and every eye closed I want to ask you today to contemplate for just a moment your life and your relationship with your God. Are you the Pharisee today, overcome by all that you are and self centered by the accomplishments of your life or are you the tax collector who has come to realize that you cannot do it on your own? I pray that you are the tax collector today! As our sermon hymn plays today I am going to ask that you keep your head bowed and that you meditate on the words of the song being played. The altar is open this morning if you would like to come forward for prayer but regardless of where you are today, know that God will meet you where you are.

Acknowledging today the presence of the creation bearing power of the light brought forth out of darkness and the breath of life within each of us, let ask to be justified before our God and our Creator as we each humbly pray, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." Amen!