St. John's Tappahannock
October 26, 2025
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Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ` God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ` God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man 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."

Let's begin by defining some of the terms in our parable today, often called the Pharisee and the Publican.

A **Pharisee** was a member of an influential Jewish sect that existed around the time of Jesus, and were known for their strict adherence to the written law and its oral traditions.

They were second only to the priests in terms of religious authority.

The name Pharisee comes from a word that means "separated one" which referred to their practice of separating themselves from the common people to study and teach the law.

Unfortunately, this idea of separating themselves in some cases lead to the attitude of the pharisee in this parable, whose self-righteousness indicates his sense of superior status.

The **Publican**, in Bible times, refers to tax collectors, some of whom collaborated with the Roman Empire, and skimmed off the top of the collected alms. The fact that his attitude is repentant and he wants to transform his life, is what actually sets him apart from the Pharisee.

This parable reminds me of a novel I read decades ago, which has a scene that helps us understand the character of the Pharisee.

The Magic Mountain is a 1924 novel by Thomas Mann that follows a young man, named Hans Castorp, who visits his cousin at a Swiss sanatorium before World War I, intending to stay for only three weeks. This was a period of time in history when psychology and the

use of talk therapy or counseling was becoming more accepted, at least by the wealthy class.

So when the protagonist Hans is welcomed by a doctor of psychology, he invites Hans to stay on longer, to take advantage of some of the various wellness opportunities. Hans declines, saying he just is just there for a short stay.

And the doctor responds, “Well then, rejoice in your total fullness!!”

The comment has its intended result, and Hans ends up staying 7 years, until WWI begins and the center closes.

While there he immerses himself in the enchanted environment and engages in conversations with the other guests about politics, and philosophy, religion, etc.

But I love that line. I imagine a heckler in the crowd yelling out to the self-satisfied pharisee as he postured on the temple stairs - “Well then, rejoice in your total fullness.”

Certainly he deserves respect for his accomplishments. However he seems to have a sense of elitism which is clear in his less than compassionate comment, summarized as: “Thank God I am not like that poor wretch over there.”

So what is wrong with this attitude? In short, the pharisee holds a stance in which there is no room for him to grow.

While the publican, probably a well-dressed tax collector who does not have the outward signs of a being a spiritual person, has the necessary quality for spiritual growth – the humble posture of someone who God can help simply because he is open to it and in fact yearning for it.

Despite these differences in character, the fact is, God sees us all the same way – all are his beloved creatures who are on a spiritual journey. We are all somewhere on the continuum of spiritual growth. If we are off the mark, God wants us to realign so that the Holy Spirit can move our hearts to where they need to be.

So we shouldn’t judge either of them – we should view both of them as God views all of us – meet them where they are, so to speak, and hope and pray for their progress on the spiritual path.

Now let’s take a second look at St. Francis, who we discussed a the Blessing of the Animals a few weeks back. He was a 12th c. Italian friar who chose to live a life of poverty when he could have had the life of a rich merchant, following in his father’s footsteps.

In this passage from the book Francis and the Foolishness of God, by Marie Denis, we learn about how we can be inspired by this humble saint.

"The story of Francis choosing to follow God as his father, rather than the path of his earthly father, in the bishop's courtyard conveys to us an essential moment in his conversion process. As Francis stood there naked, completely vulnerable … he divested himself of much more than just his clothes and belongings. In effect, he relinquished family identity and reputation and the security of his economic status.

For Francis, divesting himself from privilege was a gospel-inspired action, one that we are invited to consider today.

Relinquishment as a call and a gift means giving up prestige and privilege, learning to listen and to accept criticism, and learning how to use our power differently and ultimately to share our power. At the very least our task as non-poor is to share the power available to us-our resources of wealth, education, influence, and access-with those who have been denied these things. This is not charity or noblesse oblige. It is a fundamental letting go to allow the very structures that benefit us to be transformed….

The way of relinquishment is the lifelong process of removing the obstacles to loving and just relationships with our neighbors on this earth and of moving toward more genuine community among all of God's children and indeed among all of earth's creatures and elements, the kind of sisterhood and brotherhood envisioned by Francis. As we help remove the obstacles to the liberation of others, we are simultaneously removing obstacles to our own liberation….

Francis took the daring leap of faith from a position of privilege into the world of the poor. His renunciation of the world, though radical, was apparently not [hard for] him. We sense that for Francis the gospel promise was fulfilled, that what one receives in return is far more than what one has given up [see Mark 10: 28–31]. Francis renounced the world only to have it given back with joy….

We find ourselves invited by Francis to be fools. Is it really possible that what is given up will be returned a hundredfold? Can we believe that as we lose ourselves, we will find ourselves? Francis, who renounces his claim on all things, is free to enjoy all things as gift. Utterly foolish. Impractical. Subversive. Even dangerous.

We can neutralize the challenge and promise of Jesus and Francis by elevating [them] into the realm of sainthood and perfection, a realm seemingly far beyond our reach. Or we can

ponder their way of living in the world and attempt to follow them, fools though we would be." **2**

And we can start by saying the Jesus prayer. Throughout the NT people who come to Jesus for healing say some form of the prayer said by the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner!"

A group of aesthetics called the desert mothers and fathers used this prayer during the bible times as a way to meditate. It is a powerful prayer because it has been prayed down through the generations. It's simple form is:

Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

One can also say,

Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.

The phrase can be breathed in and out, syllable by syllable, as a 20 minute or more meditation. The goal is to let go of all the words, and enter into a state of openness to God's spirit. As Paul says in Romans 8:26-27 - **26** Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. **27** And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

If we pray: *Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner,* God removes all impediments to our spiritual growth, whether or not we know what they are.

So let us all recognize the importance of having a stance of openness to the movements of the Holy Spirit of God, the One in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). A transformed heart, over a lifetime, can help change the world, help build community here at St. John's, and can bring us each much joy.

Let it be so.

Amen.

References

1. Mann, Thomas; The Magic Mountain; S. Fisher Verlag, Germany, publisher; 1924

2. Marie Dennis, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Joseph Nangle, and Stuart Taylor, St. Francis and the Foolishness of God, rev. ed. (Orbis Books, 2015), 21–22, 28, 29, 31, 32.