

## 22 PENTECOST (LECTIONARY 30) OCTOBER 24, 2010 CYCLE "C"

### TITLE: THE GOOD GUY AND THE BAD GUY

READINGS: Jer. 14:7-10, Ps. 84:1-7, Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18: 9-14

The famous actor Gregory Peck once was standing in line with a friend waiting for a table in a crowded Los Angeles restaurant. After waiting for quite some time they weren't making any progress toward the front of the line. Gregory Peck's friend became impatient and said, "Why don't you tell the maitre d' who you are?" Mr. Peck responded with great wisdom, "No," he said, "if you have to tell them who you are, then you aren't." This is a very good lesson that the Pharisee in our Gospel pericope today apparently hadn't learned. "God," he said, "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." Lk.18:11-12. But such a prayer would not be out of the ordinary for those during the time of Jesus. The Pharisees, after all, were the religious experts of their day. There's no one who could keep the law like a Pharisee. If we add the accomplishments he mentioned along with the huge collection of ritual laws that this man kept with scrupulous precision, you've got a heavy hitter, a spiritual slugger, a veritable Babe Ruth of biblical law. He was the "good guy" for sure!

The tax collector, on the other hand, had nothing to commend him. He was no better than the rest of his kind. He was hated and despised by the people because he collected taxes for their oppressor, Rome, and was even given permission to steal, for whatever he collected over and above his quota was his to keep. There was no question but that he was the "bad guy." And as far as religion was concerned, he was considered to be pretty much at the bottom of the heap.

So what was Jesus teaching? He was not saying that the Pharisee was necessarily wrong in his deeds of morality and piety, or that the tax collector was right in being a swindler and extortioner. What was wrong about the Pharisee was his approach to God: he prayed with himself; he set before God all his merits, compared himself with the Publican, and said with Little Jack Horner, "Oh what a good boy am I!" He destroyed his goodness in one blow. He came before God trusting in his own righteousness, or we might say self-righteousness. The tax collector, on the other hand, knew where he stood. He was the "bad guy." And Jesus tells us, "He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" Lk.18:13 He was acceptable to God because he threw himself on God's mercy.

So what do we see in this parable? We should be aware of three very important things as we listen to Jesus' words:

- 1) God knows us as we really are.
- 2) God accepts us as we are.
- 3) God never leaves us as we are.

First of all, we may be able to deceive those around us, but God knows our hearts. He sees and knows our true selves. God knew the Pharisee was not genuine in his prayer. And he knew and saw the humility, sincerity and genuineness of the tax collector who, as Jesus tells us, “went to his home justified.” We, too, need to remind ourselves that we are completely open to God. There are no secrets between us. And if that is the case, when we pray from the heart, God will know our prayer is sincere, humble and genuine.

But God not only knows us as we really are, he accepts us as we are. We tend to think, as did the Israelites, that wealth and goodness and blessings come with success and that God’s wrath and punishment comes to those who are bad. That would be true if we were in charge. But, “God is God” as the great theologian, Karl Barth says. God acts as God acts. And Jesus says in our parable today that God is a God who justifies the ungodly. To throw oneself on the mercy of God, as our tax collector did today, is the right thing to do and God declares us sinners righteous when we do. That’s the way God’s mercy works. It’s not deserved at all. It’s a gift: an utterly free and unexpected gift.

Finally God never leaves us where we are. Our God is a cunning craftsman. With beautiful skill, wisdom and ability our God forms us, shapes us, molds us into the saints we are capable of being. There is a story about the great master Michelangelo. After he had finished his great masterpiece of Moses, he stepped back and flung his hammer at the sculpture, crying out, “Speak!” Even though his Moses was a magnificent, masterful, life-like carving, he didn’t speak. But our God, the divine craftsman, takes our mismanaged lives, our failed efforts, our sinful lives and out of his awesome resourcefulness creates something new, worthy and wonderful. He shapes us, forgives us, forms us, and molds us into his Son, if we, like the tax collector, place ourselves in his merciful arms. We must realize that from beginning to end we are saved by God’s grace. **Amen.**

**Pastor Barney**

### **Addenda**

The Pharisee’s prayer may sound prideful (or even arrogant) to our ears, but to Jesus’ listeners it would have sounded all too familiar. This is how Pharisees are supposed to pray. There are even a few examples of this sort of prayer that have come down to us. Here’s one, from the Babylonian Talmud:

I thank you, O Lord, that you have given me my place with those who sit in the seat of learning, and not those who sit at the street corners; for I am early to work, and they are early to work; I am early to work on the words of the Torah, and they are early to work on things of no moment. I weary myself and profit thereby, while they weary themselves to no profit. I run and they run; I run toward the life of the Age to come, and they run toward the pit of destruction.

If that doesn't sound righteous enough, then try this one:

Rabbi Judah said: One must utter three praises every day: Praised [be the Lord] that He did not make me a heathen, for all the heathen are as nothing before Him; praised be He, that He did not make me a woman, for woman is not under obligation to fulfill the law; praised be He that He did not make me...an uneducated man, for the uneducated man is not cautious to avoid sins.

And from your pastor:

Thanks be to God Jesus straightened us out!