

Good evening/morning.

I need your help with my sermon today. Please raise your heads, and your voices, and repeat after me:

God, I thank you that I am not like other people.

Together God, I thank you that I am not like other people!

Admit it - that is so fun to say, isn't it?

Those words are placed in the mouth of the Pharisee in today's parable. He is loved by God, and he and everyone else knows it. But his actions are described in such a way as to call attention to himself, and not to God. It's not that he's hasn't gained some sort of special status. In fact, the title *Pharisee* is based on a word meaning "to be set apart." He has dedicated his life to studying the sacred texts, and is considered a foremost expert on the laws of the temple, and the governing of the daily lives of her people. Some scholars believe that Jesus was a Pharisee, but one who placed **God's love of all people** above the laws of the synagogue.

And it's not just fun for us to say – to thank God that we are special – er.... it's honest. Not because we are not like other people – the truth is, we are exactly like other people. But it's honest because sometimes, just sometimes, we do get it right. We are not thieves, at least not in the light of day, but that's not to claim that we don't, on occasion, attempt to possess things, or people, that are not ours. We might not be adulterers, or tax collectors, but we might – sometimes – step beyond the boundaries of some agreements or covenants to get what we want.

And we might choose to have

and to hoard

out of **scarcity and fear**

- to cling -

rather than to let loose

of our money and time and possessions, and the possessions of others that have us stuck - and trust that with faith there is always enough. There is more than enough.

Today's readings remind us of that truth – that we are surrounded by abundance. An overflow of rain, of harvest, of wine and oil. We are promised plenty, and we are assured that we will be satisfied. We are also promised visions, a pouring out of God's spirit, and a beautiful, holy temple in which to dwell.

There is another voice in these stories. We are reminded that we have suffered. That we will suffer. That we've had plagues, destroyers, and armies set against us. We were deserted, and without defense. We were. You were. I was too.

German philosopher Nietzsche said “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.” and there is overwhelming scientific data to support that. People who suffer and who survive, persevering through trials of loss and change, can experience what is called PTG – post traumatic growth. Trauma and set-backs, for those who have what they call an aptitude for psychological adjustment, can serve as a sort of weight training, or strength conditioning, across our lives.

The various writers of today’s readings say as much. It’s rough, but with faith and forgiveness, we will be given dreams, a crown, we will be pulled from the lion’s mouth, and set towards heaven. We will be exalted.

Even if you have the faith of a tax collector... it is enough. A tax collector, who was considered to be among the lowest of the low in those days, is held up in the parable as an exemplar of faith. What everyone else knows about him is... he exploits his Jewish brothers and sisters. They know that in order to make a living he also lies to his employers – to Rome. He’s working all sides against each other, and against himself, and yet he humbles himself before God and, claiming himself a sinner, asks for mercy. A mercy we know he is assured.

I love hearing these two voices – one bellowing across our public personas, demanding that others see in us a greatness that deserves to be admired, followed, liked, friended- right up next to the voice that humbly, without any sense of entitlement, asks for mercy.

When I say that I am a sinner, I do not typically call down upon myself the whole weight of what our theologians call “The Fall of Man” – I’m fine with letting men carry that one themselves. And, as a sinner, I’m not lining up with the great evil doers of the world, because as I’ve just admitted, I’m clinging to the possibility that God grades on a curve. But I believe CS Lewis got it right when he said that sin is that which separates us from God. He said that it does not matter how small our sins are, or even if they are things that can also bring us closer to God – like music, wine, our bodies and our words – but every time we make choices about these things to glorify ourselves, they can turn us away from God – even those gifts can create separation. And these are the sins in which I trade.

Jesus’s parable today reminds us that we are, in fact, just like other people; sinners, saints, broken and whole, and everyone in between. Every day. And God asks all of us, even so, to be faithful.

This time, please, bow your heads, and repeat after me:
God, be merciful to me, a sinner.
God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen

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