
We’ve been here in this city for a very long time – in fact, we’ve been here since our people first moved here. When you look at the full history, for a lot of that time it’s hard even to tell the difference in the city and our congregations. They were basically the same thing. … The generations who have worshiped here – and the line of clergy who have been leaders of the community just as much as they’ve been religious leaders. The identity of the city really can’t be separated from the identity of our congregations. +++ +++ It’s only been in recent generations that things have started to change, as the rest of the world crowded its way into our perfect community,… new ideas… money flowing in from every direction… a new powerful elite showing up. Especially in the last few decades, even the local people have begun to change – taking up strange new kinds of spirituality that’s not only hard to understand – but it challenges our central role in the city. – And now – these new-fangled, ambitious, and charismatic folks show up and tell everybody we’ve got it all wrong; that traditional religion is too focused on rules – following rules – enforcing rules. But somebody has to do it – right? +++ And, you know, when you’re threatened – when you see the old power structures turned upside down (and not in your favor), it’s tempting to circle the wagons. It’s easy to become frozen: “We aren’t the ones who need to change. We’re good enough just like we are. We aren’t the problem. The problem is everyone else.” +++ +++ Does this sound familiar to you? It should… because it’s what the Pharisees and other religious leaders were feeling at the time of Christ – as we see in today’s Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. +++ Since the Israelites first moved into the Promised Land, since Day One, Jerusalem had been their holy city. The temple had been built a thousand years ago, when Solomon was king, and priests had been a central part of the culture ever since – especially the past 500+ years since the end of the Babylonian exile. Since then, priests had grown to become political as well as religious authorities. That was the Pharisees’ inheritance: to be the enforcers of the law, the final word on matters of theology and morality. They held themselves to be more pious – more righteous – than other Jews. And they lorded over God’s People. +++ +++ And so, when a new kind of spirituality began to arise – a great moral awakening led by charismatic leaders like John the Baptist – and, eventually, Jesus – the Pharisees reacted defensively. They became all the more insistent in their own piety. They refused to budge from their complacency. They no longer hungered and thirsted for the Word of God – no longer dreamed of the day when God would do something new – but hunkered down to protect their own power.

These are the waters Jesus treads into with today’s parable. “‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.’ In this corner is the upstanding self-exalted pious man of God… and in that corner may be the most hated and corrupt man in town – a collaborator with the Romans. Which will be justified by his prayer? The Pharisee goes first: ‘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!’” The Pharisee starts out strong: he knows all the standard prayer words and puts them together skillfully – but you don’t get the sense he’s changed at all by the experience – he’s done this a thousand times and will do it a thousand more. The tax collector, on the other hand, doesn’t even know what to say – he doesn’t know how to pray. But in the presence of God, he realizes how empty he is – how short he has fallen – and all he can muster is a humble prayer for mercy. +++ +++ And, of course, the outcome is no surprise: Jesus says, “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.” +++ +++ Victory for the tax collector – we were pulling for him all along, weren’t we?

You know, some of Jesus’ parables are hard to interpret, but this one’s not, is it? It’s clear what he’s talking about. So clear that we know what’s going to happen by the time it ends. And, when I read it, I realize I’m actually pulling against the Pharisee. “Yeah, Jesus, you tell him! He’s got no business being so self-righteous – that so-and-so, thinking he’s got all the answer.” +++ +++ And somewhere near the front of my mind, in spite of myself, I realize there’s a prayer forming – a prayer that’s almost ready to put into these words: “God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee.” … What about you? Does something like that go on inside you when you read this? +++ We catch ourselves, don’t we? We might not be as self-righteous as the Pharisee, but we also aren’t quite with the tax collector, either – ready to bare everything, to strip away our layers of self-protection, our sense of modesty – to come to worship ready to risk everything in order to be made new again – ready to declare our desperate need
for grace, mercy, and forgiveness. +++ “God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee.” +++ +++ The tax collector doesn’t do anything like that – he’s too wrapped up in his own need to be forgiven. In fact, he doesn’t even name specific sins – he doesn’t list the people he’s hurt, or try to compute the total amount of money he has swindled… nothing so tidy as that… He just begs, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Thinking back to the opening words of my sermon, as I reviewed the background of the Pharisees in Jerusalem, did the story strike a little close to home? Did it remind you of anything besides the Pharisees in Jerusalem? +++ I admit that I intentionally talked about it in ways that would sound an awful lot like the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton. (Preachers are tricky like that sometimes.) Like the temple and priests of Jerusalem, this church has been here since the first colonists arrived. And, for a lot of the time since, the history of the town and the church are one-and-the-same. … The generations who have worshiped here – and the line of clergy who have been leaders of the community just as much as they’ve been religious leaders. The identity of East Hampton really can’t be separated from the identity of our congregation. +++ And we’ve faced some of the Jerusalem priests’ challenges, too – as the community changed:: new – different – people arrived – money changed everything – and somehow this close-knit community of families became “THE Hamptons” – yet here we stood. Not immune to changes across the nation and world that drove church attendance lower and lower, our own numbers dwindled as well – yet here we stood. And as new ways to commune with the divine have arisen in popularity – spirituality without the trappings of religion – and a general distrust of religious institutions – here we stand. +++ +++ But, I think this simple, seemingly obvious, parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector invites us to self-examine:: How can we ensure – as this church stands generation after generation – that we aren’t standing STILL?? +++ Would we be content to just work our way through a list of well-ordered prayers, with all the right words, only to leave as the same person who arrived, unchanged? … Or, on the other hand, how hungry are we to drop our defenses before the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, without a plea except to receive God’s mercy… and to go home utterly re-made? How much do we expect God to DO something new through us each week when we walk through those doors?

I think this is the perfect time for such an examination. +++ Here – about a month before Advent, it’s time to rediscover our desperation for the arrival of our Savior. +++ Here – on Reformation Sunday, it’s time to repent anew, like Martin Luther and John Calvin before us, and drive the Church ever-closer to God’s will for us. +++ Here – as we enter our Stewardship season – it’s time to look inward and prayerfully ask how the Holy Spirit is leading you to contribute to the church:: Yes, that includes financial giving, but so much more as well. Your time. Your talents. Your leadership. Your wisdom. … And, your love. +++ ||| +++ Joel points to such a time as this in our Old Testament reading – there will be a time of plenty and satisfaction, a time when we can praise the name of the Lord openly and know that God is in our midst. Then, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,… your old men shall dream dreams,… and your young men shall see visions.” +++ It’s not a time for complacency – it’s a time for inspiration – for new energy. It’s a time take risks – a time for courage. And the GOOD NEWS is – when we accept the call to change the world in the name of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is ready to empower us and lead the way.

So… now it’s your turn to face God in the temple. Which will you be? The exalted one who will be humbled – or the humble one who be exalted? … The Pharisee – ready to stand pat – with nothing to confess except how deeply perfect you really are… Or, the Tax Collector – ready to empty yourself and become someone new for the Lord… ready to see visions and dream dreams? +++ As you look to the future – your own future as a follower of Jesus Christ – and the future of this church and its mission here on the East End of Long Island…. As you look to that future – what do you see?? A comfortable place – a lukewarm place that’s a little bit tired – but satisfied with who we’ve been and what we’ve done. A place with comfortable unison prayers, with easy unison confessions without too much risk involved? – OR, do you welcome Joel’s vision for who we can be as God’s People, when God’s spirit is poured out upon our flesh – creating new pathways for Christ into the community, connecting a universal spiritual hunger with the work of the Holy Spirit, ensuring social justice, and engaging more and more of our community in serving the unserved? Which will you be? This morning, I challenge you to choose your path and walk it. Choose the irresistible grace of Christ – and change the world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.