

**PSALM 65:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>Praise is due to you,  
    O God, in Zion;  
and to you shall vows be performed,  
    <sup>2</sup>O you who answer prayer!  
To you all flesh shall come.  
<sup>3</sup>When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,  
    you forgive our transgressions.  
<sup>4</sup>Happy are those whom you choose and bring near  
    to live in your courts.  
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,  
    your holy temple.  
<sup>5</sup>By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,  
    O God of our salvation;  
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth  
    and of the farthest seas.  
<sup>6</sup>By your strength you established the mountains;  
    you are girded with might.  
<sup>7</sup>You silence the roaring of the seas,  
    the roaring of their waves,  
    the tumult of the peoples.  
<sup>8</sup>Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;  
    you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.  
<sup>9</sup>You visit the earth and water it,  
    you greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
    you provide the people with grain,  
    for so you have prepared it.  
<sup>10</sup>You water its furrows abundantly,  
    settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers,  
    and blessing its growth.  
<sup>11</sup>You crown the year with your bounty;  
    your wagon tracks overflow with richness.  
<sup>12</sup>The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
    the hills gird themselves with joy,  
<sup>13</sup>the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
    the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
    they shout and sing together for joy.

## LUKE 18:9-14

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' <sup>13</sup>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!' <sup>14</sup>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."

## SERMON

Group projects were always a pain when I was in school. I know this is shocking to you all, but I was the kind of student who tried to go above and beyond in most of my schoolwork. So, group work, at least when I couldn't choose my own group, drove me crazy because it often amounted to me doing my usual amount of work and sometimes the work of other unreliable group members, and other people getting good grades I thought they didn't deserve...good grades based on the work of other group members and not based on their own, sub-par contributions. Group projects, at least in my memory, were some of the great injustices of my academic life. There were, of course, a couple of good group projects along the way, with hard working friends and colleagues...and then there was that one group project I did in college, analyzing a poem from the nomadic Islamic people of Kyrgyzstan, which led to a date, which led to my marriage...but that's a story for another time. For the most part, group projects were the ultimate in unfair and unbalanced work. Even more work than usual, other people getting my good grades.

And today's parable, of the Pharisee and the tax collector, kind of feels like a group project. It all takes place on a normal day at the temple. This good, upstanding, thoughtful, if a bit pompous, religious leader comes to pray. And he stands there, off by himself, and he prays, "Thanks God. I'm so glad I'm a pretty good guy. I'm glad I'm not greedy or adulterous, or even like that bad guy over there. I do all the good things you want me to do. I tithe to my church and I honor the Sabbath. Thanks." And yes, the prayer sounds a bit pompous, I'll give you that. But, honestly, it's a pretty ok prayer to pray. This guy isn't shouting from the rooftop, it says he was praying by himself, and essentially he's saying, "I'm glad I'm a good person, and I'm glad I do religious things." We might find his language a bit puffed up, but the content is not too far from what we pray on Sunday mornings.

And then there's this other guy, the tax collector. We are familiar enough with tax collectors to know that these guys were sinners. They not only collected taxes on behalf of the occupying Roman force, which isn't inherently sinful but it is detestable to the local community. What was problematic about the role of tax collectors is that they were swindlers, for the most part. If Rome asked for one dollar, a tax collector might tell the people Rome actually wanted two dollar. They'd give one dollar to Rome and pocket the other. That was a sinful behavior, stealing from and lying to their neighbors. So, this lying, stealing, sinner of a tax collector comes to the temple one day. He stands off by himself, his eyes downcast, pounding his hand on his heart, saying "Oh Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Again, this is a prayer we're familiar with. We pray the same thing, every week here at church during the prayer of

confession...together we acknowledge our own sin and the ways we fall short.

And so, like so many other parables, we have two characters set up to contrast one another: the righteous, if a bit self assured, religious leader and the repentant tax collector. Both in prayer, both at the temple. And the interpretation of this story feels obvious, right? We expect Jesus to offer the “conventional unconventional” reading and say something like “the prayers of that tax collector are better than the prayers of that pompous Pharisee.” Or “God likes a repentant sinner better than a puffed up religious leader.” And maybe that is what he’s saying. Because Jesus goes on to say, “This one, the tax collector is justified instead of that one, the Pharisee.” So, yes, maybe Jesus is saying that the humble prayers of the sinner are better than the arrogant prayers of the righteous. Sure, maybe. But that’s boring...and the parables, as we've seen so far, are anything but boring. In fact, we’re really looking for the parable to challenge us with an unexpected perspective...not a boring interpretation.

And so, there’s a trick, hidden in that little word “instead of.” All languages have words that mean many things. In English, if I say “to cleave” I could mean to hold two things together, like “the child cleaved to his mother.” But “to cleave” can also mean to split in two, as in “to cleave a log.” Or, the word “to weather” can mean that something is either disintegrating due to the impact of the weather as in “the deck weathered over time”, or it can mean “to hold fast” as in “the ship weathered the storm.” We rely on context to let us know what the other person means. So, when Jesus is talking, this little word that some Bibles translate as “instead of” as in “the tax collector is justified instead of the Pharisee”, it can also easily mean

“alongside” or even “because of.” “The tax collector is justified alongside the Pharisee.” “The tax collector is justified because of the Pharisee.” And all of a sudden, this parable gets way more interesting...because we weren’t expecting Jesus to say that! We can wrap our heads around the idea of a repentant sinner. And we’re surrounded with examples of good, but pompous, people. We would call them “self-righteous” and we don’t really like them that much, so, we’re ok with the idea that repentance sort of outweighs self-righteousness. We might even be ok with the idea that a repentant sinner could be forgiven *alongside* a righteous, but arrogant person. That’s not too bad, we like the idea that Jesus loves all people.

But, what about this final reading? “The tax collector is justified because of the Pharisee.” That’s a lot harder to understand, and far more challenging to consider. And the very fact that it’s a more challenging thought to consider makes me think this might be what Jesus meant. But it’s hard, because it just sounds unfair, right? It sounds like group project, to me. The tax collector goes about, swindling his neighbors out of money, collaborating with the occupying government, and then he gets forgiven *because of* all of the good works of the Pharisee who went to church, paid his tithe, fasted from time to time, and took the Sabbath seriously? You mean that tax collector gets an “A” even though he partied all weekend, while that poor Pharisee sacrificed her Saturday night to create a great group project!? How unfair! Life shouldn’t work that way!

But doesn’t that sound just like Jesus? I mean, really. The technical term for this is called “communal righteousness” and Jesus is always banging on this drum. In fact, it’s the whole basis of the Jewish faith, the idea that a whole community of people can be affected by the sin

of a single person, that everyone can be made righteous in the sacrifice offered by a single priest. It's right there, in the Lord's prayer. It's not "give me today my daily bread" or "forgive me my debts," it's all communal language "give us our daily bread," "forgive our debts," "lead us not into temptation." Again and again, Jesus is always reminding his disciples: it's not just about you, it's about us. All of us, together.

And the whole theology of Christianity is, in fact, built on this communal righteousness. The key idea for all of us is that we exist because of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are justified by him and by what he did.

So, I'll say it again, "the sinner is justified because of the righteous one." Doesn't that sound more like Jesus? And doesn't that sound like the kind of community Jesus wants us to be? A place where the sins of one do affect all, but the righteousness of one can also lead all of us into a better way of being.

As I got older, I started to realize something about group projects. It actually wasn't a big deal that other people got good grades based off of my work, you know why? Because I was still getting a good grade, and even more than the grade, by doing the hard work, I was learning the material. I received the benefit of those projects because I did the work. And if others got a good grade because of that, so what?

And in life, that's a hard attitude to hold on to...a lot harder than with a class project. Because it's really hard to see people succeed and do well when we feel like they're cheating to get ahead. It's so

easy to say, “well, I had to work hard, so you have to work hard, too.” It has echoes of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps and all that. But...life isn't about our own individual choices, is it? We're all affected by the choices of other, the good and the bad. Our air and water are shaped by the way we interact, use, and sometimes abuse our environment. We collectively pay for public education, even if we don't have kids in the school, because we consider education to be good for everyone in society. Our nation is shaped, not by our vote alone, but by the votes of the many.

We got new paraments this week, and as I unpacked and ironed them this morning, I was so struck by how apropos they were for worship today. I love the image of the intertwined sphere, and it's a beautiful visual for this parable. Our lives are interwoven and intertwined. The prayers and choices of one affect the others.

And so, I'll read it again, “the tax collector is justified because of the Pharisee.” It's challenging to live our lives this way. It's hard to imagine that we should be righteous, thoughtful, and good people, in part because it might rub off on others. That others might benefit from our good deeds...or to flip it around, that we might benefit from the good of others. But because it's hard, it sounds like Jesus. It sounds like how he taught and spoke, and it sounds like how he lived his life, and it certainly sounds like how he died: giving up his very life on the cross, so that others might live. And then it reminds of what he calls all of us to in the new life of the resurrection: to be a community of faith, loving and serving one another, baptizing all people, that the choices we make together would bolster and build up the kingdom of heaven.