Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. Luke doesn't really have to tell his readers that the two men went to different places in the Temple once they arrived. Jerusalem's Temple was organized in terms of degrees of sacred space; that is, the more holy a person was deemed to be, the closer he could get to the inner sanctum, that place where only the priest was allowed. If you can imagine a set of concentric circles representing the Temple, with the holy of holies in the center, a Pharisee would certainly be closer to that inner space than a tax collector, once of the least respected members of society. The Pharisees were the elders of Judaism, distinguished by strict observance of the traditional and written law. They were scholars who could interpret both the written and ancient oral traditions. So a Pharisee like the one in Jesus' story would have a prominent place in Temple worship. He would stand by himself, but probably in a strategic place where the most people could see him. In his regal robes and his long beard, the Pharisee would command attention. He would begin to pray in a quiet and dignified way. Most of the people would not be close enough to hear him but might assume that his prayers were better, more holy than theirs. I wonder what those people would have thought if they knew the Pharisee was thanking God he was not like them, not like robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like the tax man.

In the meantime, the tax collector likely snuck in, head down so he did not have to make eye contact with anyone. Tax collectors were not liked or respected. Many of them collected not only what was owed to Rome, but some extra for themselves, some of the worst creating an 80% tax rate for some of the poorest people on their route. This particular tax man stayed in the shadows, face in his hands, and made his prayer, “God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.” If Jesus had set his listeners up, had asked them to tell him which of the two men – the Pharisee or the tax collector – went home made right with God, most of the people would have played right into Jesus' trap. It was a no-brainer; everyone knew that the Pharisees were revered leaders in the church and the tax collector was one of the most unpopular people around. Imagine the people's surprise when Jesus told them this: “This tax man went home right with God.” I love the way the Message Bible translates the next part, Jesus' comment on the ways of the Pharisee: “If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face.” Though he may have been sincere in his prayers, the Pharisee placed his trust not in God, but in what he had achieved in his community and Temple. The Pharisee was smart and well-educated. He was the one people sought out to learn more about scripture or holy law. He was financially secure and had everything he and his family needed to survive and even thrive. He had worked hard for all of it. No doubt he was truly thankful he was not like other people – commoners who committed all sorts of unsavory sins. The Pharisee may have gone home righteous – assured of his better standing with God than those he named in his prayer, but he never mentioned a need for God, never showed any kind of vulnerability, never acknowledged that he could so easily be in the same boat as those he put down in his prayer. A serious illness or death in his family. A change in the way his higher-ups thought he was doing his job. Losing the money he had invested. Walking around with his nose in the air meant any of these things could trip him up and he would never have seen it coming.

Meanwhile, back in the shadows, the tax man was pouring his heart out to God. He rightly named himself a sinner and turned to the only one who could or would show him mercy. This man placed himself in God's hands, admitted his need for forgiveness, showed a vulnerability that the Pharisee did not exhibit – at least not to those who were watching him. It's a paradox of God's kingdom that someone who acknowledges his or her total dependence on God can be healed and made whole but those who cannot admit to their powerlessness might never accept the new life God desires them to have.

This past week, I was at a Gathering of the Ministerium in Virginia Beach. This is just a fancy way of saying I was at a meeting of pastors and other church professionals. One of the sessions was about the election of a new bishop that will take place at our Synod Assembly next spring. Three synodical bishops were asked to speak about what they think is important when looking to call someone as bishop. I heard one bishop speak about needing to get along with all kinds of people and about finding his or her work to be fun. He also said he goes from church to church to make sure pastors in his synod are preaching the gospel. Another bishop talked about needing to know scripture and the early Christian writings. I was sort of nodding off by the time the third bishop got up, but I think she spoke about needing to be well-organized and ready for surprises. The advice was OK for the five minutes or so each speaker was given. But none of those bishops talked about what I was waiting to hear: that a good bishop is one who is humble before God, who admits that the position is terrifying, who is willing to own up to her or his mistakes, who knows that only by God's grace can he or she do anything. In other words, I would rather have a bishop who stands in the corner and asks for God's mercy, than one who takes a position of prominence and prays he or she is not like those around them. [*Our synod has been blessed to have a bishop who has exemplified humility for the past 18 years, even as he has shown himself to be a fine scholar, a sensitive teacher and a devoted disciple of Christ. I trust that the Holy Spirit will lift up another who will carry out the role with grace*.]

Life in this world at this time vibrates with an intense energy that seeks to separate us from one another. How easily we could slip into the prayer of the Pharisee: “Oh, God, I thank you I am not like other people – not like that Republican, that Democrat. I thank you I am not like that rich man or that poor woman, that person who gets on my nerves, that one who doesn't respect me for who I am, that person whose accent I can't understand, that one whose piercings and tattoos make me want to look the other way.” How easy it is to lift ourselves up by putting the other down. But God does not spend precious time separating us out into different categories, does not assign us higher or lower places in God's church. God just sees God's broken, hurting, vulnerable children whom he wants to pull close and forgive and love forever. God wants us to look always to the cross, so that we, forgiven and humbled by God's grace, might ease up on our judgment and see one another through new, more sympathetic eyes.

There is another way than the name-calling, blame-casting model of our society. In the end, in God's eyes, we are more alike than we are different. We all wear the cross of Christ's sacrifial love, the crown of his unending glory; we all are sisters and brothers in God's globe-spanning family. And when we fail miserably? When we let our pride get in the way of our compassion? God invites us to come to him, not posing or showing off, but quietly, humbly, asking God for mercy and another chance that we do not deserve, but that grace always, always grants us.

Amen.

*Pentecost 23C*

*October 23, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 18: 9-14*