

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the eighteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke

“... And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “God be merciful to me, the sinner.” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

It is easy to see why the Pharisees in the Gospels provide such inviting targets. They were the spiritual elite of Israel in our Lord’s days on earth. They were God-fearing, church-going people who carefully studied the Scriptures and scrupulously obeyed every commandment they found there. They even invented new commandments and new restrictions on what they considered acceptable conduct. They were pillars of the community, educated, well-to-do and proud of it.

People seem to enjoy knocking people like that off their pedestals, and they especially enjoy catching them in hypocrisy. But there is another reason as well that Pharisee bashing is so popular. Jesus had some very caustic words for at least some of the Pharisees, and some of them, in turn, were at least partly responsible for His death.

In order to be faithful to today's Second Lesson, I, too, am going to have to be critical of the Pharisee who appears there. But first, I would like to say something in his behalf.

This man recognizes that God is a righteous God who takes an active part in the affairs of the world and lives of men. He also recognizes that God holds people responsible for their actions. That is a huge step up from the attitudes of pagans.

The pagan deities, you see, are not righteous. They require homage from their worshipers and little else. Since the pagan deities themselves are without discipline and know nothing of self-sacrifice, their worshipers are pretty much free to do as they please as long as they pay tribute to the gods.

Some pagan philosophers postulated a creator god who set the world in motion and left it to run by itself. Some people today still think about God that way. But the Pharisees believed in a God who is righteous Himself and remains active in the world He made. A God who cares very much how people live day-to-day.

The Pharisee in the story had a grasp, even if it was a distorted one, of a chosen people who were called to exemplify higher values and higher moral standards as well as a higher degree of self-discipline than others. He saw himself as just such a person. He acknowledged, at least with his lips, that God is the source of all virtue and all righteousness, and he was grateful that God had given him such an abundance of those qualities. "I thank thee, God, that I am not like other men."

The problem with this man is he took the good news about God, the Jewish gospel if you will, and turned it into bad news. He did not recognize that God, in His justice, was the liberator of captives and the defender of the weak. He saw God only as a severe and demanding judge, and the result was that the Pharisee himself became a severe and demanding judge.

People do tend to become like the gods they worship. Some would say that is because men create gods in their own image. The Bible says it is the other way around. Leviticus says, "You shall be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy". The Psalmist says of the idols who represent false gods, "Those who make them are like them." The Pharisee worshiped a God Who evaluates people by a very strict standard, and he himself became an evaluator of people by a very strict standard — a standard that he proudly saw exemplified in himself.

I have no doubt that when Jesus told this story, the people were surprised. That was the idea. He wanted to jolt people out of their complacent acceptance of the Pharisee's concept of God and to move them to another level. That level was the tax collector's understanding of God.

The tax collector, like the Pharisee, understood that God really cares about how people live and holds them responsible for their actions. But the tax collector understood something else. He understood that God is merciful, and he directed his appeal to that divine quality of mercy: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner."

Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector does not compare himself to anyone else. He says "the sinner" as if he were the only sinner in the world. He almost seems to be unaware that other people are sinners as well. He is there to plead for mercy, not to justify himself by comparisons with other people.

This man worships a God who is quick to forgive. As a result, he himself is generous in his assessment of other people. That's how Jesus wants all of us to be. "Be merciful," he says, "as your Father in heaven in

merciful.” Jesus also says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” Both of those sayings come from that block of teaching that we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthews’s version and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s version. That block of teaching describes the character of the people who inhabit the Kingdom of God. They are people who are formed after the manner of this tax collector.

That man knew that his only hope of salvation was to appeal not to justice but to mercy. And he also knew that if he hoped to obtain mercy he must also extend it to others. And Jesus said, “This man went down to his house justified rather than the other.”

The tax collector’s hope is our hope as well. There is not one of us who can make a legitimate claim to the favor of God. We are all beggars who rely on the kindness of God, and God expects us, I should say he requires of us, that we share with other beggars the kindness, the mercy, the generosity that he bestows on us.

Think on this next communion Sunday when you see the table that will be set before us. There is not one of us who can approach it as a matter right. “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.”

May the God of mercy be glorified in us who are being shaped in His image. May people see in us not an aloof elitism but a true reflection of the God who loves the world so much that He sent His only-begotten Son to live among us as a servant and to lay down His mortal life as a sacrifice for our sins. May our judgment of others be as generous as the judgment we hope to receive. And may our prayer be the prayer of the man who went to his home justified: “God be merciful to me, the sinner.”

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