

8.15.2021 Trinity 11 (Luke 18:9-14)

Only the hungry can be fed. A few weeks ago, when John, Patricia, and I were at the Provincial Synod, a priest stated that fact in the middle of his sermon. Only the hungry can be fed. Weeks have passed and today I can't recall anything else he said, but I still remember that statement, and the powerful way he used that truth to emphasize how our souls must hunger to receive Holy Communion, because only the hungry can be fed.

Even the most memorable sermon can be fairly easy to forget, so the fact that I'm still thinking about one sentence, found in a sermon I heard weeks ago, is evidence that priest is accomplishing what God has called him to do. He's studying the Gospel, receiving the Truth it proclaims, and sharing that message with the world in a relevant and memorable way that's certain to lead people closer to God.

This morning, I hope to follow his good example by sharing a Gospel truth with you that's memorable and applies to all of us. So much can be said about the parable we read today, but this is the truth I'd ask you to consider, the truth I hope you'll remember and share with the world: Only those who know they are dead can rise to new life.

Our Gospel reading this morning is a familiar story that Jesus told to people *"who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others"* (Luke 18:9). He said, *"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"* (Luke 18:10-14).

When we listen to this story, one of the first things most of us probably notice is how different these two men are. One is a Pharisee, the other is a publican. One is a member of a highly respected religious group known for their strict adherence to the rites and ceremonies of the Law, while the other is a tax collector, a traitor who was working for the Romans, a sinful man who made a huge salary by stealing from his own people. One of them, the Pharisee, stands proudly in the presence of God at the Temple, and prays not to God but with himself, thankful that he is *"not as other men are."* The tax collector

on the other hand won't even look up. In humility, repentance, and sorrow, his only prayer is "*God be merciful to me a sinner.*"

These men are very different, but the biggest difference between the two of them is that the tax collector knows he is dead, and the Pharisee does not. The tax collector knows that he's lost and broken and in need of God's mercy, while the Pharisee, as Jesus told us, is trusting in himself, in his own righteousness. Now, if you're thinking that the differences between these men sound familiar, you're right. The Pharisee and the tax collector look a lot like two people we heard about in our last Gospel reading, the prodigal son and his older brother. You'll remember that, like the tax collector, when the prodigal finally came to his senses, he knew that he was dead. In fact, his father described him that way, saying, "*this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found*" (Luke 15:24). You'll also remember that, just like the Pharisee in today's reading, the prodigal's brother trusted in himself, in his own righteousness, and despised others - most of all his brother. It's easy to picture him praying *with himself*, "God, I thank thee, that I am not like my brother. All these years I've served my father and have never broken any of his commandments."

Only those who know they are dead can rise to new life. In today's Gospel reading the tax collector "*went down to his house justified,*" not because he was a better man or more righteous than the Pharisee, he certainly wasn't. The tax collector went home justified because he knew that without God he was dead, and in humble repentance he cried out, "*God be merciful to me a sinner.*" God gave the tax collector what he asked for - mercy, and He gave the Pharisee what he asked for - nothing.

Only those who know they are dead can rise to new life. Only those who know they are dead will stop trusting in themselves, in their own righteousness, and will cry out to God with words we prayed together this morning, Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us. For the tax collector, for the prodigal, for all of us, God's mercy marks the beginning of our resurrection, the beginning of a new life and a new relationship with Him, and whether you've just begun to walk in the light of that new life, or have been on this journey with Him for years, know that a choice is set before us every day. Every day this choice is ours to make, to trust in ourselves, in our righteousness, or to cry out "*God be merciful to me a sinner.*" Through this parable Jesus assures us that humble plea is a prayer God answers, because the tax collector went down to his

house justified. By the grace and mercy of Almighty God may we be people who return to our homes justified, declared righteous before God, by humbly and faithfully acknowledging the death of who we used to be, and rising to new life in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.