

8.28.2022 Trinity 11 (1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 18:9-14)

The Epistle and Gospel readings this morning contain the words of two Pharisees. First, we heard from St. Paul, who identifies himself in Scripture as *“a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees”* (Acts 23:6), and Paul, in the Epistle we read today, is writing to the church in Corinth, and in an act of genuine humility, declares himself to be *“the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”* He tells Christians that it is only *“by the grace of God I am what I am...”* (1 Corinthians 15:9-10). The other Pharisee, whose words we heard today, is a character in a parable Jesus told about two men who went up into the temple to pray; *the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.* This unnamed Pharisee who Jesus told us trusted in himself, in his own righteousness, and despised others, pridefully stood in the temple 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”* (Luke 18:11).

The Epistle and Gospel readings this morning contain the words of two Pharisees, and as you can see, there is a vast difference between these men. In St. Paul, we recognize a man who was certainly, at one time, as proud of himself and his religion as the Pharisee was in the story Jesus told. Before his conversion, Paul may very well have prayed the words of that prideful Pharisee, standing before Almighty God, trusting in himself, boasting about how he fasted twice in the week and gave tithes of all he possessed. At an earlier time, Paul may have done just that, but on the Damascus road, he met our Lord in a very personal and powerful way, and at that moment God gave him a new heart. Paul described that experience by saying, *“As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’”* (Acts 22:6-7).

At the moment of his conversion, under that *great light from heaven*, Paul began to recognize the depth of his fall. Perhaps for the first time, he considered his thoughts, words, and deeds from a true, objective point of view. We can imagine him recalling the day they killed St. Stephen, and how he stood there watching, giving consent and approving of the death of the first Christian martyr, or remembering the way he’d taken hold of innocent men and women and dragged them off to prison, for no other reason than that they called themselves Christians. Now, in this letter we read today, St. Paul

again remembers his past, forgets all that he has since done for our Lord, and humbly declares himself to be *the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*

Conversion, a personal encounter with our Lord and God, gave Paul a new heart, and filled his soul with gratitude toward God, honest humility, and a sorrow for past sin that stands in sharp contrast to the deceptive pride, vanity, and self-righteousness that we recognize in the Pharisee from the parable. Remember, Jesus, when He told that story described that Pharisee as a man who trusted in himself, that he was righteous, and by his outward appearance we can be sure many people thought he was righteous. He followed all the rules. He fasted twice in the week, gave tithes of all he possessed, and went to the temple to pray, but following all the rules didn't change his heart. We hear that in his prayer. He despised others, he thanked God that he was not like them, and, Jesus said, this man did not return to his house justified (Luke 18:14). All that right-doing in the name of God, didn't lead to right-being with God (Matthew 7:22). His works didn't justify him because we are not justified by works of Law (Galatians 2:16). We cannot work our way into a right relationship with God.

The Epistle and Gospel readings this morning are meant to be read together, and when you do so, there's a real sense in which you end up with the story of two very different Pharisees. One of these Pharisees, St. Paul, fell to the ground when he met God on the Damascus road. Under the heavenly light of that encounter, Paul saw his pride and hatred as exactly what these things are, sinful separation from God our Father, and *by the grace of God* he repented, his heart was changed, and in humility he turned to follow our Lord. The other Pharisee, at least at this point in his story, had not yet experienced, or perhaps he had not yet responded to, such a personal encounter with God. This Pharisee was still trusting in himself and his own works-based righteousness, as he, in an outward way, followed all of God's commands. He fasted, he tithed, he prayed, but he was filled pride, *despised others*, and his heart was far from God.

This story of two Pharisees that our readings provide us with today in several ways parallels the great story we heard just two weeks ago, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You might say, in today's version of that parable, we have St. Paul, the prodigal who comes to his senses, in humble repentance turns away from his former life, and on the Damascus road journeys home to his Father,

who receives him not as a hired servant, but as a son. A son who is loved by the Father, a son who truly loves his Father in return, a son who, to use his own words, after coming home *“laboured more abundantly”* (1 Corinthians 15:10) in his Father’s field than all of the apostles. Again, not as a hired servant, St. Paul labored more abundantly as a son. His difficult life of service to God, even his death as a martyr for God, was not servitude, it was perfect freedom.

Now, the prodigal’s older brother, in today’s version of this story, is the unnamed Pharisee in the parable Jesus told, and just like the prodigal’s brother, this Pharisee stayed home, worked hard, and obeyed the rules. He was in Jerusalem, praying in the temple, fasting twice in the week and giving tithes of all he possessed, yet while his body was at home, his heart was in a far country, because he was filled with the kind of pride that led him to look down upon and despise others, and a self-righteousness that led him to believe he could earn, and deserved, God’s favor.

Two weeks ago we heard a parable about a Father and His two very different sons, and the passages we read today tell the same story. It’s often been said that God loves to use repetition to attract our attention. Perhaps this repeated theme of prodigals returning home, older brothers who wish the younger would have stayed lost, and a Father who loves them both unconditionally is a lesson God wants us to learn again, and again.

So much can be learned from the prodigal and his brother, or St. Paul and the unnamed Pharisee, because these people each possess different qualities we can all relate to, but in conclusion, consider this thought about the Father. When you read the words of St. Paul, or the parable of the prodigal son, you quickly discover these passages are not primarily about St. Paul or these sons, but instead, they are vivid illustrations of God, our Father, and the perfect way He loves His imperfect children. Notice how perfectly the Father loves St. Paul, though Paul persecuted the Church horribly, God came to him with the message of love and forgiveness on the Damascus road. Notice how the Father loves the prodigal, though he demanded his inheritance, left for a far country, and wasted it all, when this child finally came to his senses, the Father ran to welcome him home. Notice how He loves the older brother, when the brother became angry and refused to go in to celebrate, Scripture tells us *“his Father came out and pleaded with him”* (Luke 15:28).

This is the nature of God's love for us. We divide and quarrel and separate, but our Father meets us on the Damascus road, runs to welcome us home, and pleads with us when we refuse to come to Him. This is a lesson, a lesson in how God loves us, a lesson in the way we should love others, a lesson that God wants us to learn again and again.