

## Righteousness

Righteousness is a frequent focus in our scriptures and within the body of Christ. It is something that we often put on a check list used to measure ourselves and others. Today's reading from Luke seems to be about this subject as well, but like many of Jesus' parables its meaning is deeper than it appears on the surface, and if we closely examine it, we may find it can make us uncomfortable. Our inclination with the parable format is to assign roles to those characters described. Since the Pharisees were religious leaders, known for their attention to following the requirements of the Torah, we might think that is our role. Yet in much of the gospel narrative the images we have of the Pharisees is not flattering. In fact, they often assume the role of the foe of Jesus. Historically they are not exactly as pictured in the gospels. In fact, the many encounters Jesus had with them are indications of a broader dialogue within the Jewish community and tradition at the time. This was a discussion which sought to understand how the Torah, the teachings of Moses were interpreted and applied to daily living. Within the tradition they were debating and defining what Sheol meant, what the possibilities were for resurrection, and how the covenant relationship was to be understood and lived. The Pharisees were the church going members of the community who paid attention to each and every detail about behavior found within the texts seeking to be obedient in all the details. We often term their approach legalistic. In today's text Jesus is still on the way to Jerusalem, teaching his disciples and those who travel with him as he goes. This parable is also told "on the way"; it is a short story with a message. It is not the description of two men Jesus sees in the Temple, but just a story about two men used to illustrate a point. It begins by describing two very different men, but the key to remember is that this parable or story is directed to an audience; a particular portion of the group with him: perhaps some are Pharisees, perhaps some others just have this mind set. This parable begins just after the story of the persistent widow's determined pursuit of justice used as a metaphor for prayer. The beginning gives us those to whom he directs this teaching: "he also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous...and regarded others with contempt. For Jesus where trust is placed is of paramount importance—as trust is basically the essential element of faith. And trust is the key to the relationship God desires to have with people. Remembering the characteristic of those to whom Jesus addresses this story we begin with two men who went up to the Temple to pray. Both men go into God's presence with the same purpose: to pray. The prayers offered are as different as the men who made them. One of these men is a Pharisee, while the other is a tax collector: men at opposite ends of the spectrum in how they live their daily lives. Jesus reports that the Pharisee went off by himself to pray, and his prayer was one of thanksgiving: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers or even the like the tax collector." He then goes on to enumerate the signs of his righteousness: "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." He is focused on what he had done; not on what God wishes to do for him. He feels he has "checked on the boxes", so to speak. He has earned his redemption. There is nothing exactly wrong with what he says; as a Pharisee he is very careful to observe all the rules found in the Torah. He is also right in what he says about his behavior as compared to those others he names. He is a prime example of an upright citizen obeying all the laws. But all that he says is focused and centered on his personal

list of achievements; what he has done. He feels his actions have justified him in God's eyes. His "prayer" then moves on to an expression of contempt and disdain for others...those who have not been in compliance with the rules, rituals and regulations found in the Torah. This is not the only place in Luke where Jesus speaks of those who depend upon themselves and their actions only to find that dependence was misplaced. That trust did not live up to what was expected. The verb used here to describe the audience as ones trusting in themselves is the same verb use to describe the strong man who depended upon his armor to keep him safe only to find it was taken away from him by a stronger man as related in Luke 11. In this parable it is obvious that the Pharisee is representing those people in the audience who trust in themselves. Pharisees appear regularly in Luke's narrative as those who criticize Jesus for his association with tax collectors and sinners; they associate themselves with the righteous and refuse John the Baptist's call to repent and be baptized. They show disdain and contempt for those not like them. Some of those in the narrative who have trusted in something other than God grumble about Jesus' mission to call those who are lost. They do not see themselves in any danger of being lost. In effect they do not seem to feel the need for God as they consider themselves self-sufficient in providing all they need to obtain deliverance. The prayer this Pharisee raises is all about himself and his righteous standing and behaviors. There is nothing in the prayer he lifts about God's kingdom and will, or about his need for God for his daily bread, forgiveness and deliverance. Those are the things that Jesus taught should form our prayers to God; things that show we know we need God's gift of mercy. The Pharisee is so confident in his lifestyle that he only notices the tax collector to express his disdain and contempt for him, thanking God that he is different; never thinking that God views him in a different light. Tax collectors were regularly associated with sinners because they served the oppressive government of the Romans, often taking bribes and collecting more than was required from their neighbors: these actions which rightly classified them as sinners. The tax collector's prayer is very different. He pays no attention to the Pharisee standing there. All his attention is focused on God and his need for God. The prayer he lifts is entirely God-centric, opening with God's name, asking for God's mercy because he is a sinner. Jesus tells us this tax collector goes home justified. The root of the word justified is the same as that meaning righteous. The person who is justified is proclaimed righteous, so this usage echoes the use of the adjective in the introduction to the parable. The contrast here is between those who trust in themselves that they are righteous and those who trust in God to justify them. The contrast is between self-proclamation of righteousness and trusting in God to make them righteous. Here the contrast between the one justified by God and the one who believes in his own righteousness as justification enough is summarized in the concluding statement: "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." This makes the message seem rather straightforward. Those addressed hear what we expect them to hear: the Pharisee and the tax collector play their parts. The challenge for us is to notice how much we might resemble that Pharisee; to notice that we rather like being exalted; that we may have created our own list of things we believe that doing might justify us, at least a little, might make us a bit better than those who fail where we succeed. We might be trusting that giving money to the church, doing religious or charitable activities, being upstanding members of our society, making a well-deserved salary might provide what we need to be justified. Or we might think that it is those things we

don't do like stealing or being rogues provides our deliverance. If we don't let go of those tendencies, then we will be prisoners to our own small righteousness and fail to understand our need for God's gift of mercy. On the other hand, we need to be aware that our failings, our living which might not measure up to the standards of the Pharisee, do not mean that we are stained in some way beyond redemption. The strangely good news of the parable is that the role of the tax collector is available to all of us. We, and everyone around us, are all sinners and we are all beloved children of the gracious Father. It is important to note that although the tax collector goes home justified, he has not promised to change. He has only acknowledged his need and thrown himself on God's mercy. We need to acknowledge our resemblance to the Pharisee; yet most often we don't want to be as utterly vulnerable as the tax collector in the parable. We are creatures who like to be in control so we cling to the idea that our actions are the determining factor. Of course they are important or God would not have sent so many prophets to give us the message about ways to live which create the community resembling God's reign. But the bottom line is that it is God's determination to love and claim us that provides for our true needs. This parable invites us to experience the freedom and joy which comes with casting away the flimsy armor we have constructed and throwing ourselves into the arms of God...knowing only God can provide for our needs. Because God is already there, God has already found us, God wants more than anything to lift us up and take us home. That is the true good news we have for ourselves and others: God's love provides grace and mercy as a gift, while it cannot be "earned", it is there for us...always. Thanks be to God.