

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**October 23, 2022**  
**30th Sunday of Year C    Luke 18:9-14**

Rarely do we see an image of a smiling or laughing Jesus. What is much more familiar is Jesus depicted as the “Man of Sorrows,” or in agony on the cross. Yet, the Scriptures record how Jesus, unlike John the Baptist, would eat and drink with the people of His day. For this He won the disapproval of the scribes and Pharisees. We can assume, rightly I think, that He enjoyed Himself on those occasions. Surely He laughed when eating and drinking. More than that, I think we can assume that at times Jesus used humor to convey His message. But humor does not travel well over centuries, or over miles. Still, if we look closely enough at today’s parable, we can detect a hint of humor.

The parable is a parody. Jesus is lampooning the sort of person with whom His listeners were all too familiar, the kind of individual who went around convinced of their own superiority, their righteousness, while looking down on everyone else. The Pharisee begins his prayer, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity.” Then, once he has gotten the formality of addressing God out of the way, he gets to the heart of the matter. The pronoun “I” appears four times. Essentially he is praying to himself. It is not that what the Pharisee has said is untrue. We can presume that he has indeed performed all those good deeds he said he has. The Pharisee’s mistake is that he has not said enough. He has not looked deep enough into himself to tell the full story of his life. With his rose-colored glasses, he has filtered out all the shadows of his life, all those characteristics and tendencies of his personality that he is unwilling or unable to acknowledge, and to accept as part of who he really is. The Pharisee has tried to tie together all the loose ends of his life in a neat bow. Jesus shows how foolish it is to claim that one’s life can be so neat, so well ordered, just so perfect.

In contrast, the tax collector is under no such misapprehension that his life is so well put together. He may have sinned, but at least he is honest with himself. He is not afraid to confront the shortcomings of his life, the things about which he is very much ashamed. He sees his life in disarray; it’s a mess, a train wreck—he admits it. And for Jesus this simple admission, hard though it may be, is the beginning of his salvation, of something new happening in his life. The Pharisee can’t admit the truth of his own situation because he refuses to look at himself. Afraid of what he is unable to handle, he banishes to oblivion all that is unpleasant, unwieldy and contradictory to his self-image. So, the Pharisee is doomed to live a hollow life; he is only a part of what he could be. The Pharisee acts as if he doesn’t really need anyone, not even God, as

his prayer betrays. He has himself, his accomplishments, his good deeds, and that is more than enough for him. The tax collector, instead, because he admits his sin, his failure is the one who is open to God's mercy and healing.

In today's Gospel, we see the religious issue Jesus addressed in His day is still a problem for us today: namely that tendency we have to write off or dismiss whole groups of people. How often does it happen that we criticize people who possess personality traits very similar to our own, but ones that do not conform to the image we have constructed of ourselves? How is it that we can have 20/20 vision to spot in others those same faults we are blind to see in ourselves? And why is it that traits and tendencies which we refuse to recognize in ourselves, irritate us so terribly, when we notice them in the people around us? Could it be that they are walking, breathing reminders of our own limitations and weaknesses? So, whenever we speak categorically and say, "I don't like people who...;--fill in the "blank,"--might we really be saying that the quality we don't like about that individual is precisely what we don't like about ourselves, but won't dare admit to or begin to deal with in ourselves? In actuality might we not be revealing more about ourselves than about the ones we are so quick to criticize.

Our task in life is to recognize that it is perfectly human to have all sorts of negative feelings and desires, and to develop a certain tolerance towards ourselves for having them--without acting on them--which in turn makes it possible to have a greater tolerance towards others. A spontaneous murderous thought never killed a single human being, but a deep-seated ill will, never acknowledged and buried in the depths of one's heart, can destroy the fabric of any human relationship, despite all the pious rationalizations that are offered to justify one's condemnation of another. The goal is to accept ourselves with all our mixed feelings in the same way that God accepts us. And paradoxically as are able to accept ourselves, we are more able to accept others too. Our prayer then might be that of the poet W.H. Auden who said, "Lord, help me love my crooked neighbor, as I love my crooked self." It is to be open and to acknowledge all the different sides of who we are, even those sides we are inclined to label as inferior or wrong. These may be the very aspects of our personality that can provide the impetus for growth and change, both spiritual and emotional.

Today's gospel urges us to be introspective, to be like the tax collector who is not afraid of what he finds when he stops to take a good look at himself. For the tax collector, there is hope, there is healing, there is wholeness, there is salvation. For the Pharisee, there is nothing of the kind, because in his conceit and blindness, he sees nothing amiss. Let us pray that we can have eyes to see, that we can love and accept ourselves in the totality of who we are, and thereby learn to accept our neighbors in their totality as well.