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AMDG

Proper 25C, Pentecost 23 - October 23, 2016

Leave it to Luke to give it to us straight. There are few of Jesus' parables that need much interpretation. And, few Gospel passages that we can't all relate to in some way. If we're honest, aren't we all like the Pharisee at times - trying to measure up, comparing ourselves to others, judging our neighbors, doing the right things for the wrong reasons? Thinking if we get the right answer, do this particular thing perfectly, then we're somehow good or worthy or righteous?

And, on the surface the Pharisee had it right - he prayed, he fasted, he gave the correct amount to the church. He was doing what he was supposed to do. But, what was the Pharisee's motivation; where was God in all this doing?

And the tax collector...well, he was a tax collector, an exploiter of the people Israel, a collaborator with the Romans! Yet, Jesus held him up as justified.

What was the difference? Was one right and the other wrong? Was one humble and the other arrogant? Those words are only indicators, insights into a fundamental difference in understanding of God and our relationship to God.

The real issue here was that the Pharisee was closed to God and thus unable to access God's grace. The Tax collector was open to God, and thus able to access God's abundant mercy.

Once the Pharisee began to pat himself on the back and point fingers at the Tax Collector he ceased being open. He ceased participating in the ongoing revelation of God's love and mercy. His language shows his basic misunderstanding about God and his relationship to God - it's all about me.

The tax collector, however, understood what the Pharisee did not: his life was God's -- his past, present, and future entirely dependent on God's grace and mercy. When he let go of the need to be better than, to prove himself, to be right - he opened himself to God, the one who creates light from darkness, raises the dead to life, and brings all things

and all people -- Pharisees and tax collectors, righteous and sinful, disciples and slackers alike -- into a realm of unimaginable, unexpected and unmerited grace, mercy and joy. As the psalmist said, "Awesome things will you show us in your righteousness, O God." That's God's righteousness, not ours.

See, it's really not about us. Big me, little me; smart me, dumb me; dutiful me, lazy me; righteous me, sinful me. It's about God. God who invites us into intimate relationship with God, to set aside our expectations, to let down our guard, to make ourselves weak and vulnerable, and utterly dependent on God's infinite love and mercy, so he may accomplish in us and through us his beautiful plan of redemption.

But, it's so difficult sometimes, isn't it. We want to cling to the illusion that we're in control. That we know what to do. That God needs to help us with our plan, not vice-versa. Our culture seems to demand this self-reliance, this rugged individualism. This can-do attitude.

But, without God we really are nothing. Without God our best efforts are debased. Justice becomes legalism; faith becomes ideology; hope becomes self-centeredness; good works become duty. We've seen it, if not in our own lives, certainly in the lives of those around us. Cynical, judgmental so-called do-gooders, annoyed when they don't get their way. Bitter when they don't get the recognition they think they deserve. Every virtue, if it is not permeated and informed by God, eventually degenerates into vice.

But, there's a simple solution. It only requires a very small change in attitude. For the Pharisee in our story, his prayer would only require the change of a few words, "God, I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income; I think I'm better than others, and yet, I'm just like this tax collector. Have mercy on me, a sinner." This simple change in attitude that comes in opening ourselves to God, putting ourselves at his mercy. To be unafraid to show ourselves to God as we are, not as we think we should be. not as we want others to see us. Here I am - afraid. Here I am - angry. Here I am - sad and confused. God, have mercy on me.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may we not be afraid to expose ourselves utterly to the God who wishes no more than to give us the Kingdom, if we would only stop trying to earn it.