

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 25, Year C, RCL

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Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

That's the thing about church. You never know who will show up. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor... [pause] Pharisee, tax, collector, Roman centurion, Samaritan, someone I don't like. It could be anyone. The church is a remarkable institution. It accepts absolutely everyone, and then makes demands that almost no one can live up to. Fasting twice a week, giving a tenth of his income to the church, and then giving more money to the poor, are not enough to make the Pharisee in today's story right with God. In fact, Jesus says that we have to leave our jobs, our families, everything we value and that tells us who we are if we are to follow him. Yeah, sure, everyone is welcome, but then watch out! It's the old bait and switch game.

Or is it? There is one who goes home justified. There is one who gets right with God. There is one who is held up to us as an example. The tax collector, the one who collaborates with the hated occupation forces of the Romans. The one who has coerced all his friends and neighbors to pay twice the taxes they owe so that he can pocket the difference. This slimy toad, this sleazy backstabber leaves the temple justified. Why? Because he puts himself and all of his actions into God's hands. He asks for the one thing God is always delighted to give—mercy. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” His life is so messed up that he can see no way out. Only God can help. He simply acknowledges the facts about who he is and what he has done. He makes no excuses and gives no explanation. “I am a sinner.” I have made choices based solely

on my desire for money, disregarding justice and the harm I am doing my neighbors. I have done what I wanted just because I wanted to. I have become a person I hate. Have mercy on me. I have not loved you with my whole heart; I have not loved my neighbor as myself. Have mercy on me.

There is a very ancient practice of prayer in the Eastern Church of reciting a short prayer called the Jesus Prayer. One says the prayer over and over in time with one's breathing. The first part of the prayer is said while breathing in, and the second while breathing out. Often one has a rope of knots and one fingers a knot each time the prayer is said. The ropes can be anywhere from ten knots to five hundred. This one has fifty. As one recites the prayer over and over, one opens ones heart to Jesus, to the love of God, and to the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is a form contemplative prayer or meditation. It can be used anywhere, with or without the knots. In grocery store check out lines, while stuck in traffic, just before picking up the telephone to make a call, when something interrupts your work or recreation.

The prayer is this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." So the first part, said while breathing in, is the invocation of the name of the son of God: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God." It is as if you were breathing God right into your chest. Then when you breathe out, you say, "Have mercy on me, a sinner." It's like you are breathing out all the poison of selfishness, of sins, of everything that forms barriers between you and your neighbor, between you and your world, and between you and your God. And, since mercy comes in an infinite number of forms, and only God knows what you need at any given moment, asking for mercy covers anything else you might ask for such as peace on earth, recovery of health for a friend, reconciliation, good weather for a vacation, or a new job.

This prayer for mercy is always answered because God loves us and because God wants only the very best for us. In a sense, all providence, all that happens to us is an expression of God's mercy. Sometimes what God knows is for our greatest good is hard for us to bear. Sheldon Vanauken describes the death of his wife at a young age in a book he called "A Severe Mercy". We all, I think, have experienced "severe mercies." Nevertheless, this prayer for mercy is always granted.

Because God loves us and made us for union with himself, it is always God's purpose to make us holy as well as whole. He intends for us joy and glory. That is what he made us for in the beginning when he breathed his own spirit into the physicality of earthly substance and made the first Man and Woman. He made us to live and to live with him. Death is the enemy. It comes as the result of our choice to follow our own desires and fears rather than to trust that God's loving command contains all that is good and joyful. It comes when we are bent and broken and twisted by our own choices. But God in his mercy and power will not allow our choices for death to be the last word. Instead, God transforms death from being the end of life, to being the beginning of life. And to this end Jesus came to us to make that great transformation. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He came to change death from an end to a beginning. He came to ensure that in the end all wholeness and holiness will be ours.

I once was privileged to go on a retreat that focused on the Jesus Prayer. One of the leaders was an elderly priest who had once been in Germany where he visited an old Russian Orthodox priest who had been a Christian inmate of one of the Nazi concentration camps. When asked how he had survived, the old man said that the constant recitation of the Jesus prayer had been his lifeline. He then handed over a rope of knots that were filthy dirty from constant use, frayed and falling apart. He said to his visitor, "Here. This is what holiness feels like." There was

a palpable sense of the history of the lives and deaths, the horrors and jubinations that these knots had prayed through. When the visitor returned the rope, the old priest pulled out a new set and gave them to the visitor and said. "Now go and make these holy." I am working on this set, and I have a long ways to go.

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

In the next few weeks we will be holding our annual every member visitation for financial stewardship. We will visit one another and talk about our giving to St. Michael's. This is one way in which we act out our dependence on God. It is not that we become righteous by giving. We are not going to be justified by giving money. But giving sacrificially is a Christian discipline that will help us become more Christ like. Pledging to the church is like saying the Lord's prayer, or coming to church, or reading the Bible. It is a Christian practice that will make us more holy, more like God, more like Jesus. God made us in the divine image. God gives everything even his own life for our joy. We honor the image of God in us by our giving. We do not give because we are generous; we become generous by giving. Our giving is one way in which we can participate in the divine joy. I urge you, as you pray about how much to give to St. Michael's, that you do not think about what is comfortable. Nor do I want you to think about sacrifice as if it were a burden. I hope that you will think about how much you need to give to feel the divine joy of giving.

The Episcopal Church has established the tithe, or ten percent of one's income as the minimum standard of giving. For many of us that seems like a lot. Alinda and I give at that level to the church and then make donations to other charities as well. It makes us happy. So give not to be like the Pharisee to be able to compare yourself against other. Give like the tax collector who cannot give anything except everything.