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Sermon: “God is Merciful to Sinners” (Luke 18:9-14)

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My oldest daughter, Cate, recently emailed me a link to a hilarious website, Book-A-Minute, in which there are ultra-condensed versions of many classic books. For example, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway is summarized like this: “An old man catches a fish that's too big for his boat. The fish gets eaten by sharks. Then he goes home and dies. The end.” Similarly, the collected works of Jane Austen are summarized like this: “Female Lead: ‘I secretly love Male Lead... he must never know.’ Male Lead: ‘I secretly love Female Lead... she must never know.’ They find out. The end” ☺.

The “Book-A-Minute” summary of this parable is this: God is merciful to sinners.

In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus tells a parable about two kinds of people: those who trust in their own works and those who trust in God’s mercy.

Luke emphasizes that Jesus had a specific audience in mind, that he “told his parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

Trusting in ourselves, or self-reliance, is ingrained in us from our childhood. When I was in grade school in the mid-seventies we would watch episodes of a TV series called *Free to Be You and Me*, which included cartoons and sketches all about being your own person and trusting in yourself. All sorts of celebrities— Michael Jackson, Dustin Hoffman, Cicely Tyson, Mel Brooks— appeared in this show, and every episode featured Marlo Thomas singing the very catchy theme song, which included these lyrics:

Every boy in this land grows to be his own man
In this land, every girl grows to be her own woman
Take my hand, come with me where the children are free
Come with me, take my hand, and we'll run
To a land where the river runs free...
And you and me are free to be you and me

I had that song memorized—I could still sing you the chorus but I’ll spare you ☺. Trusting in ourselves is ingrained in us even as kids.

And it’s not only Marlo Thomas; it’s also Ralph Waldo Emerson (how’s that for a smooth transition? ☺). Emerson, the nineteenth century poet and essayist who led the Transcendentalist movement, wrote this in his essay, *Self-Reliance*: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Unfortunately Emerson is right, every heart indeed vibrates to the iron string of self-

reliance. Each of us tends to put our trust in ourselves, and since Jesus directed this parable to those who trust in themselves, that includes us.

He also directed this parable to those who regard others with contempt.

I have the privilege of conducting many weddings each year. During the wedding rehearsal as each member of the bridal party practices the procession I'm always amazed at how many judgmental looks I see from others in the wedding party or the pews as they watch each person process down the aisle, judging their dress, their shoes, their weight and their gait—sometimes with cruel glances of contempt. All of us have been in situations in which we have felt regarded with contempt, or in which we have regarded others with contempt. All of us in one way or another have experienced both the pride of judging the one walking down the aisle or the pain of walking down the aisle alone, feeling judged.

Jesus' parable is for all of us.

In his parable there are two men who go to the temple to pray: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Jesus first describes the Pharisee as standing by himself and praying. He starts out his prayer well—"God, I thank you..."—but instead of thanking God for all his blessings he thanks God for what a great person he sees himself as: "God I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." The Pharisee saw himself as God's gift to the world; he saw himself as being literally in a class by himself. He took pride not only in what he did—"I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income"—he also took pride in what he did *not* do, like steal or commit adultery.

The Pharisee was dripping with pride. He prided himself not only for keeping the Old Testament law, but going beyond it. The Old Testament law only required that one fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29, 31), but the Pharisee fasted twice a week. The Old Testament law only required that one tithed of their crops (Deuteronomy 14:22), but the Pharisee tithed on all his income, even herbs and spices (Matthew 23:23). The Pharisee felt like he had earned enough points to be righteous in the eyes of God.

But this pride, this trusting in ourselves, this preoccupation with earning enough points, is not unique to the Pharisees; it's in all of us. I recently read Walter Kirn's humorous and poignant memoir, *Lost in the Meritocracy*, in which he recounts his never-ending chase for more merits in his life. Kirn writes:

"My SAT scores launched a new phase in a trajectory that I'd been riding since age five... A natural child of the meritocracy I'd been amassing momentum my whole life, entering spelling bees, vying for prizes, plaques, citations, stars, and I gave no thought to any goal beyond my next appearance on the honor roll. Learning was secondary,

promotion was primary. No one ever told me what the point was, except to keep on accumulating points, and this struck me as sufficient. What else was there?” (p. 9).

Eventually Kirn’s incessant effort to accumulate more points led to a breakdown, but even after his breakdown, he reverted to his chase for more points. He describes what he did as he neared graduation:

“I scanned the horizon for another test to take, another contest to compete in. I hadn’t learned any lessons from my breakdown. The curse had me right back in its grip. Here I was, just this side of mental paralysis, and again I was starving for medals, stars, acceptance letters. To me, wealth and power were trivial by-products of improving one’s statistical scores in the great generational tournament of aptitude. The ranking itself was the essential prize” (p. 189).

Like Walter Kirn, we are all natural children of the meritocracy, we all gravitate toward the idea of earning more points. We all tend to be like the proud Pharisee.

Jesus then describes the other person in the parable, the tax collector. Tax collectors were hated in Jesus’ day because they worked for the Romans and had the authority both to appraise something and then decide how much tax needed to be paid for it. They had booths, similar to toll booths, along the road and would collect taxes from farmers and merchants heading in and out of town. There were often Roman soldiers who accompanied the tax collectors to make sure the taxes were paid. Fraud was rampant, and while tax collectors tended to be extremely wealthy they were often extremely hated, especially by the Pharisees.

Even today Americans are not necessarily enamored with employees of the Internal Revenue Service. My grandmother worked for the IRS for many years in Denver. She told me there was a man who angrily marched into their office every year with a huge bag of pennies along with his tax return. He hated paying taxes and wanted them to know it, so he paid his taxes entirely in pennies that were not even rolled. My grandmother told me she loved to smile at him, and say, “Thank you—see you next year!” ☺.

But unlike the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable who is dripping with pride, the tax collector is marked by humility. Jesus tells us that “the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner.’”

The humility of the tax collector was evident in both his posture and his words. The tax collector did not arrogantly prance into the temple and look up to heaven while he informed God about what an amazing guy he had been. The tax collector did not recite a litany of all the wonderful things he had done or all the evil things he had not done. The tax collector simply appealed to the mercy of God: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

In fact, the phrase “a sinner” could be more accurately translated, “*the* sinner.” This is not a mere grammatical technicality, but reveals that unlike the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not like other people who were sinners, the tax collector saw himself not only as a sinner, but as *the* sinner. Unlike the Pharisee who considered himself to be in a class by himself as a paragon of righteousness, the tax collector considered himself to be in a class by himself as *the* sinner.

In the Old Testament we see a similar prayer from David. David, who had defeated Goliath and lead Israel to defeat the Philistines; David, the shepherd and consummate warrior-poet; David, one of the greatest kings in the history of Israel, committed adultery. After being found out he wrote Psalm 51. Psalm 51 does not include anything about all the great things he had done for God or Israel. Instead, Psalm 51 simply begins, “Have mercy on me, O God.” It is an immediate and direct appeal to the mercy of God, not for others, but for himself. Doubtless, David, like the tax collector, felt at that point in his life like *the* sinner.

Similarly, in the New Testament we see that the Apostle Paul, who had been a Pharisee and a vehement persecutor of the church, saw himself as the “foremost” of sinners (I Timothy 1:15).

The good news is that God answered the tax collector’s prayer. The good news is that God is merciful to sinners, sinners like the tax collector, sinners like King David and the Apostle Paul, sinners like you and me.

And because God is merciful to sinners, the tax collector “went down to his home justified.” To be justified means to be righteous in God’s sight, to be accepted by God, to be found innocent. This justification is entirely, 100% a free gift of God in Jesus Christ. It is not based one iota on anything we have done or not done. Justification is not based on how many points we have earned in the meritocracy. Justification is freely offered to all of us.

This is because in his death on the cross Jesus Christ, the Son of God, paid the price for all our sins. Jesus walked alone down the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus was regarded with contempt. Jesus Christ became *the* sinner in our place, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Corinthians 5:21). Jesus paid the debt we owe God for our sin, every penny, and he didn’t do it out of anger; he did it out of love.

And because of Jesus’ death on the cross we too, like the tax collector, can go home today justified, assured that we have been forgiven and accepted by God.

One of my heroes, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury and author of the first and second English prayer books (1549 and 1552), who was burned at the stake for his convictions, wrote several sermons that were part of *The First Book of Homilies*. One of these sermons is entitled *A Sermon of the Salvation of Mankind by Only Christ our Savior from Sin and Death*

Everlasting (how's that for a sermon title? ☺). Listen to what Cranmer preached about justification by faith:

“This saying, that we be justified by faith only, freely, and without works, is spoken for to take away clearly all merit of our works, as being unable to deserve our justification at God's hands; and thereby most plainly to express the weakness of man and the goodness of God, the great infirmity of ourselves and the might and power of God, the imperfectness of our own works and the most abundant grace of our Savior Christ; and thereby wholly for to ascribe the merit and deserving of our justification unto Christ only.”

Cranmer makes it crystal clear that justification, acceptance with God, is based solely on trusting in God's mercy, not our works.

A couple years ago I was emailed a video of a dad who had a son with cerebral palsy, whose arms and legs were curled up at his sides all the time. The dad adored his son, and he also competed in Ironman triathlons. The video montage showed the dad gently placing his son in a raft and then pulling him as he swam 2.4 miles, then placing his son in a custom-built bike seat for the 112 mile bike ride, and then place his son in a stroller for the 26.2 mile marathon. At the finish line there was not a dry eye, the dad and his son were laughing and hugging. The son was completely dependent on his dad, and his dad loved him and got him all the way to the finish line. That's what the mercy of God is like.

The truth is that although trusting in ourselves is something that we're brought up believing, eventually the iron string of self-reliance rings hollow, eventually all of us find ourselves like the tax collector—head down, standing at arm's length, feeling like *the* sinner, desperately in need of the mercy of God.

The good news is that God is merciful to sinners. The good news is that like the tax collector we can put our trust in a merciful God. The good news is that the death of Jesus on the cross is proof once and for all that, as we pray each week in the prayer of humble access, we serve a God “whose property is always to have mercy” (BCP 337). Amen.