

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote “The Gospel is a stumbling block. The danger is that you stumble over the wrong thing.”

With that in mind, today’s is a dangerous gospel reading. We are presented with two prayers: that of the Pharisee and that of the Tax Collector. And, truth be told, we want to identify with the Tax Collector while saying to ourselves, “Thank God I’m not the Pharisee.” And in that moment we are trapped by this simple story.

The story begins with the Pharisee’s prayer “Thank God I’m not like that tax collector.’ It is easy to spot a touch of arrogance as he then lists his good deeds.

If we were the Pharisee, we might point out that we attend worship most Sundays, bring food for the pantry, increase our giving each year and live a moral life. Like the Elder Son in the famous parable of the Prodigal Son, this Pharisee has done everything that was asked of him and therefore he believes he is entitled. He claims righteousness before God – drawing a distinct contrast to the Tax Collector.

The tax Collector was a model of unrighteousness. He lived an immoral life, in repudiation of everything God asks of us. As a tax collector he was a part of the Roman tax system which was oppressive and unjust. Everyone was at the mercy of the tax collector; he preyed upon his family and friends, and fed his family on the misery of his neighbors. In his prayer, he throws himself on God’s mercy.

Are we hearing the simple prayers of two very different men....or are we listening to the inadvertent confessions of two sinners? To confess is to tell the truth, and there sure is a lot of truth telling going on here....and once the truth is laid bare, we begin to recognize the need for healing and forgiveness in each.

Listen carefully as the Pharisee confesses his self-sufficiency. **He** has done all that is necessary to claim righteousness and done it well. **He** has accomplished his own salvation.....unfortunately without any reference to the love and benevolence of God.....and even more telling, without any

reference to loving his neighbor. This Pharisee knows God as a law-giving judge but has no knowledge of the God of mercy.

The Tax Collector, on the other hand, has no list of good deeds and righteous acts. He is solely dependent on the God of mercy and in his humility he knows it. If God's love for humankind is no more than an adding up of deeds in our lifetimes, then this Tax Collector knows he is lost. So he cries out, "Lord be merciful to me a sinner" and everyone within hearing distance would have added their Amen.

Yet, that is where he stops. He begs for mercy but gives no hint that he intends to change what he is doing, how he is living, who he is oppressing. There is no hint he will be merciful to others as he has received mercy.

This Tax Collector well understands he is lost without God's mercy, but he too has lost sight of love for his neighbor – the very neighbor he will pressure for tax money, whose children will go hungry so that the tax can be paid.

Oh yes, the Tax Collector has confessed he is a sinner.....but gives us no indication that he has any intention of changing course. He throws himself on God's mercy without aligning his actions with God's purposes, without the pain of changing himself or his life. He wants his mercy cheap – at the lowest discount possible.

So what do we have? A Pharisee who wants to claim the prize of salvation for himself by his own actions and a Tax Collector who wants to claim the prize of God's mercy for himself without taking any action.

Each shows a hungering for God's mercy that comes without cost, without engaging God's plan for all creation, without the pain of changing our lives. We are willing to live with a measure of GUILT as long as we aren't asked to GROW, and to accept DISCOMFORT. We want our mercy cheap.

The Pharisee is stuck in a rigid, never changing worldview where there is nothing new to learn; love has atrophied in his life. The Tax Collector is

stuck in an ethical swamp with no easy exit and great risks; he's content where he is.

Yet Jesus draws both into the life of God where God's love and forgiveness are found, where there is mercy for the self-righteous religious activist who rejects others.....and mercy for the one who is weak and seeking an easy way out of the swamp in which he lives.

Jesus walks alongside each to re-acquaint them with the deep and everlasting love of God for them – while also calling back to life those parts which have died within them. For the Pharisee, Jesus draws him back into a love that sees, protects, and loves all the neighbors. For the Tax Collector, Jesus draws him back to walking a path that heals rather than hurts.

Jesus draws each of these men back to God – the only one who can justify, the eternal source of mercy and life, the power of life for all of creation.

Jesus draws each of us – back to where we are about the business of building a community of light and life for all of God's creation – where we will endure discomfort in order to grow in mercy, where we will recognize and confess all the times we judge who is unacceptable.

Jesus draws us back to the place where all our trust is in God and not in our 'good works' and back to the most basic of all confessions: Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.

For your sake, and for the sake of your world.

Amen