



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

THE TWENTIETH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST
October 23, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Three things struck me this morning in hearing the ever so familiar parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Let's consider each of them...briefly. And the first very briefly. I heard somewhere that my favorite colleague may be addressing that one next Sunday. So I just want to tease it a little.

Jewish Law required that everyone tithe all of what they produced for the benefit of the priests. Thus, they would contribute 10 per cent of their crops to the Levites or priests for their service. The standard of the tithe is well-known and still serves as a benchmark for contributing to the operation of the Church – including, but not limited to the compensation of the priests. It may be distinguished from almsgiving, which is giving to meet the needs of the poor. So we might make a distinction between contributing to the operating costs of the church versus giving to the Blue Door or Bike Shop, which fall more logically under the definition of almsgiving, and which is distinct from the obligation to tithe.

But more to the point of the parable, the Pharisee tithed not only on his crops, but on all of his income. He also fasted twice a week, when he was required only to fast one day a year on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. The Pharisee did not let the minimum become the maximum. Jo and Kermit the Frog (not Jeremiah, the bull frog) will elaborate on that next week. Stay tuned.

The second point of the parable similarly emerges primarily from the context of Jewish Law. The Pharisee went the Temple to pray. Why? Because prayer was considered to be more efficacious in the Temple. And because devout Jews observed three prayer times every day – 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m., going to the Temple likely was inconvenient for the Pharisee, but, again, he went the extra mile, so to speak.

Now I am always struck by the similar Muslim tradition of daily prayer times. Five prayer times a day are compulsory:

1. At the beginning of the day, before sunrise;
2. After the day's work has begun, shortly after noon;

3. Late afternoon as a reminder of God's presence and the greater purpose of life;
4. Another remembrance of God as the Sun goes down; and
5. When retiring in the evening to recall God's presence, guidance, mercy, and forgiveness.¹

We have seen it on television and in the movies, the call goes out from the mosque, and Muslims stop what they are doing, unroll their prayer mat, prostrate themselves, and pray the appointed prayers. What an inspiring example we get from the Pharisee and from our devout Muslim sisters and brothers. And all we need do is realize that we have the very same custom in our own tradition as Episcopalians.

At the very least, our Book of Common Prayer includes specific prayers for communal or individual use as Morning Prayer, Noon prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline at the close of the day. The Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century provides eight specific times of daily prayer, and from the Roman Catholic tradition, the Liturgy of the Hours, which has evolved over time, but maintains the basic structure of specific prayers at set times of day. Even our little prayer flyers for Advent and Lent offer prayers for four times of day. And, of course, every evening around eight o'clock we gather via our Facebook live stream for Compline.

Should we imagine how different our lives might be if we if we followed the example of the Pharisee and lived into our tradition as Episcopalians, praying daily at specified times of day? Might God just be a little more of a presence in our lives?

The third and last lesson from the parable this morning is about what we might call vindication. What was the Pharisee seeking in his prayer? He was arguing his case to God. He was telling God how good he was, and, moreover, that he was good enough. And he was doing so by comparing himself to the wobegone, repentant tax collector. So, what's wrong with this picture? After all, the Pharisee did pray as required, even going to the Temple. And he did tithe and fast beyond what was required. Why did he miss the mark?

Can we ever imagine that true prayer would involve denouncing another human being, another child of God?

¹ Huda , "The 5 Muslim Daily Prayer Times and What They Mean," *Learning Religions*, updated May 4, 2019, <https://www.learnreligions.com/islamic-prayer-timings-2003811> (accessed October 16, 2022).

The Pharisee neglected what was painfully obvious to the tax collector – that he, too, was a sinner, as we all are. That none of us stands above or outside “sinning, suffering, sorrowful humanity.”²

Where the Pharisee went awry was in comparing himself to a despised member of society, when he should have been comparing himself to the life God calls us to.

In the 15th century, Thomas a’ Kempis wrote a handbook for spiritual life called *The Imitation of Christ*. It is brutally demanding, so much so that I must confess that I rarely dare to pick it up, much less read it. But far better we hold ourselves up to the life of Christ. Because the question is not whether we are better than other sinners, but whether we are as good as God in the person of Jesus Christ. *The Imitation of Christ*, \$11.98 in paperback on Amazon or free in .pdf on various websites. Just Google it.

Yet how often do we ask ourselves am I good enough to get to heaven. In seminary, most of our grades – mainly, pass-fail – were based on papers we were required to write. At one point I told Jo, I am going to start writing increasingly poorly to see how badly I can write and still pass. Let’s translate that to how much can we sin and still get to heaven. Of course, none of us ever think like that. Of course, we don’t.

And here we learn from the attitude of the tax collector. He knew he was a sinner. And what justified him before God was his placing himself as a sinner solely in God’s grace and mercy.

The tax collector was vindicated before God because he was genuinely sorry for his sins and cast himself on the mercy of God.

Last week, Jo mentioned my use of the call to confession from the Anglican Church of Canada, with which we are in full communion. Those few words say so much about who are and who God is.

God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy. And whom does he welcome to his table? All of us. Sinners seeking God’s forgiveness. Just as we acknowledge in our invitation to communion. Come all you who have tried to follow, and all you who have failed. Or as we say, all of us, who have failed.

We may never trust in our own goodness. The parable leaves no doubt about that. We can only trust in God’s grace, God’s steadfast love, and God’s

² William Barclay, *Barclay’s Daily Bible Study* <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/luke-18.html> (accessed October 17, 2022).

4

infinite mercy. That's what the tax collector understood. He was a sinner. And only God could vindicate him. And that is exactly what God did.