

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Lately I've been rereading *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis, one of my all-time favorite books. I know that some of you read it when it was a Trinity Reads selection a few years ago. If you haven't, the basic idea is that Lewis imagines an excursion by bus, almost a holiday, that people in Hell can take to Heaven to try it out. Lewis' characters from Hell are so true to life that they make me a bit uneasy. Sometimes I feel like I'm almost looking in a mirror, or think of people I know who mean to be good but don't really get there.

In one of the vignettes Lewis describes a visitor from Hell who complains to one of Heaven's Bright People that everything they do or say is considered wrong. The heavenly figure nearly bursts out laughing. "But of course!" he says. "That's what we all find when we reach this country. We've all been wrong! That's the great joke. There's no need to go on pretending one was right! After that we begin living."

That's precisely the sentiment that the Pharisee in today's Gospel passage doesn't understand. That scene, too, is easily imagined: the Pharisee standing tall and proud, reeling off his accomplishments to God, sneering at all those despicable types beneath him, catching sight of the tax-collector to round off his list of low-lives. Meanwhile the tax-collector can't even bring himself to look up. He just beats his chest and pleads for mercy. A starker contrast could not be made.

No doubt the tax collector had plenty to repent. As Roman collaborators, the collectors of the imperial tax were notorious for demanding more than required so they could line their pockets. Most were cheaters and all were despised. The Pharisee, on the other hand, followed every letter of the Jewish Law. He was completely confident that he was on the path to salvation and reminded God just how good he was.

And that was his downfall. The Apostle Paul, who as Saul tried to out-Pharisee the Pharisees, discovered one blinding day on the Damascus road that his ideas about salvation were totally wrong. He wasn't saved through works of the Law but only through the grace of Jesus Christ. He could do nothing to earn salvation. The letter to Timothy we heard this morning describes Paul nearing the end of his life as he anticipates the heavenly kingdom. He has finished his race, not by his own strength but by the strength of Jesus Christ.

Last week at the vestry meeting I took my turn in telling my faith story. We've been doing that for over a year, beginning with an opening reflection and then vestry members taking turns telling faith stories. It has transformed vestry meetings. In mine I told of the first time I preached at Trinity Cathedral, now some thirty years ago. John Hall was the Dean at the time and I was in the Education for Ministry program with other Trinity folk. One day Dean Hall wondered if I would be interested in preaching at Trinity. As I wrestled with the decision, I mistakenly thought I would be able to do it on the strength of my own church background and learning. Wrong. I had a big argument with God, who seemed to think that I needed to give all of that up and rely on him alone. I finally gave in and admitted God was right. I described it as coming up to the edge and stepping off, trusting that God would bear me up, as the psalm says. I, too, had to learn that grace is freely given, not earned.

That temptation to what is called “works-righteousness” is never-ending. Another book I like to reread was written in 1728 by William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. When John Wesley came upon that book he scrupulously put it into practice, so much so that he and his friends were called “Methodists.” Yet the more Wesley tried, the more miserable he became. It was only when he encountered the deep, heartfelt faith of the Moravians that he realized the grace of Christ was more valuable than slavishly following rules.

So many of the stories from Luke’s Gospel these past few Sundays have dealt with what we do and how we act. In each one the forgiving love of God is so great that at times we want to protest. Surely it is unfair for God to love those people, to forgive so much! I suspect that most of us are more like the Pharisee, wanting to believe that following the rules is the most important thing in the life of faith. It isn’t. God’s grace is freely given to *all* through Jesus Christ, including those we don’t think worthy of it.

In *The Great Divorce* not many of Hell’s characters end up staying in Heaven. They are too focused on themselves to admit the presence of the light shining around them. They prefer their own company to God’s. One of the reasons I reread the book is to remind myself of how close I can come to being that way. Being a Pharisee and looking down on others can make one feel good for a while. For eternal joy, however, one has to choose the grace of Jesus Christ.

[Pentecost 20: Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14.]