

“There’s Nothing Wrong with Me”

Genesis 4:1-14, 2 Timothy 4:5-8; 15-16; Luke 18:9-17

Proper 25-C, October 23, 2016

There is a lovely little prayer, that first appeared in the **1622 Book of Common Prayer**, that not only Anglicans but that we Lutherans also have often prayed at the beginning of our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. Some of you, I am sure, are familiar with this little prayer that goes like this: **“Almighty God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”**

It’s a powerful little prayer because in our praying it, it sets aside all false pretense on our part—that any of us could ever come into the **direct presence of Almighty God “worthily”** based on our own **human efforts and merit**. In praying this little pray we are **reaffirming for ourselves those magnificent words that St Paul one day wrote to the church at Rome when he said: “For there is no distinction since we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God!”**

This is the bad news! We are all—in God’s eyes—in the same boat whether we like or not, labeled by him as being sinners in this world. But then Paul goes on to share with us our constant cause for celebration: **“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:23-25)!**

I am so grateful to **St. Luke that he shares with us at the beginning of our Gospel lesson today the fundamental reason why** Jesus chose to share this parable with all of us who are his disciples, and who by the power of the Holy Spirit, have now become members of his Church. Luke writes: **“Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9)!**

Zig Ziglar, that great motivational speaker, once said: **“Conceit is the weirdest disease of all—because it makes everyone sick except the person who has it!”**

And doesn’t this seem to be true with respect to the Pharisee whom we meet in our Gospel lesson today? The Pharisees, as a whole, were not bad people in that they were people who took seriously the call of God—to live out “holy” lives as we make our way through this journey called life!

The word “Pharisee,” however means “separatist.” Because they devoted themselves so completely to living out their lives in obedience to God’s Word—there were times—no doubt—that many of them did: **“Trust in themselves that they were righteous, while treating others with contempt!”**

So let me tell you now, if you will, about a terrible automobile accident that happened out there somewhere on nation's highways. It was a two car collision involving 4 passengers in one car and three passengers in the other.

Fortunately the accident did not prove to be fatal for any of those seven passengers traveling in their cars. And from all outward appearance some seemed to be definitely in worse shape than others. Several ambulances in addition to Highway Patrolmen arrived on the scene. The paramedics wanted everyone to go to the hospital because some were severely wounded, but others not so much so from all outward appearances. One man in that accident refused to go to the hospital even though one of the paramedics pleaded with him to do so, informing him that because of the impact of those two automobiles—the accident could have done some damage internally to the vital organs of this man inside of body. But the man refused. Instead he insisted: **“THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH ME!”** He phoned his wife, who was 30 miles away to come to the scene of the accident and to take him home. **She too, pleaded with her husband to go to the hospital to be checked out, but again he protested saying: “THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH ME!”**

He did go home, but unfortunately, later that night, while in his sleep—he died!” And doesn't this seem to really be the contention of that Pharisee who went up to the temple one day to pray?

Why didn't he just summarize his prayer by saying: **“God, I thank you that there is nothing wrong with me!”?** The answer, of course, is because his trust was not in God, but his trust was something he placed within himself.

“Two men” Jesus said “went up to the temple to pray - a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men: Extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week! I give tithes of all that I get!’”

Maybe the Pharisee was right! He was a good citizen. He obeyed the law. He lived a moral and upright life. He even did the religious things you were supposed to do: **(1) According to the Old Testament standard, he gave ten percent of his income to church; and (2) He even fasted twice a week.** --- Really, there's wasn't much wrong with him...from all outward appearances. **But just like for that man in the automobile accident—OUTWARD APPEARANCES MAY SOMETIMES BE DECEIVING.**

But then Jesus focuses our attention on the tax collector in his story – the opposite of the Pharisee. He had been stealing money from people his whole life – ruining the lives of others so that he could live it up. Something must have happened in his life that suddenly brought him to the realization that for all practical purposes, his whole life had been a disaster, and that he deserved to go to hell when he died.

Jesus says that “the tax collector stood at a distance” – he wouldn't even walk up to the front of the temple – “He would not even look up to heaven” – he was so ashamed of his sin – “but beat his breast and said, ‘God have mercy on me, a sinner.’” His prayer was the opposite of the Pharisee's, wasn't it?

Maybe you can sum the tax collector's prayer up this way, "God, there's everything wrong with me. Help me."

It may help to note that, in fact, everything the Pharisee says is true. He has set himself apart from others by his faithful adherence to the law. It isn't that the Pharisee is speaking falsely, but rather that **the Pharisee misses the true nature of his blessing**. As Luke states in his introductory sentence, **he has trusted in himself. His prayer of gratitude may be spoken to the Lord, but it is really about himself. He locates his righteousness entirely in his own actions and being.**

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows that he possesses no means by which to claim righteousness. He has done nothing of merit; indeed, he has done much to offend the law of Israel. For this reason he stands back, hardly daring to approach the Temple, and throws himself on the mercy of the Lord.

I don't think it's an accident that this exchange takes place at the Temple. On the grounds of the Temple, you were always intimately aware of who you were, of what status you had, of what you could expect from God.

There were, at the Temple, "insiders" and "outsiders," and according to these rules there was no question of where the Pharisee and tax collector stood.

But when Jesus dies all this changes. As the Gospels report, the curtain in the Temple is torn in two (Luke 23:45), symbolically erasing all divisions of humanity before God. That act is prefigured here, as God justifies not the one favored by Temple law, but rather the one standing outside the Temple gate, and aware only of his utter need.

Next Sunday, Mount Olive Church will join **with millions of other Christian congregations around the world in celebrating the many blessings which God has brought to the lives of so many believers** throughout the world in the **Reformation of the Church**; a movement that looks back to that day **when Father Martin Luther's nailed his 95 Theses for debate to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg**, in what today is known as Germany, on **October 31, 1517**.

The first of those 95 Theses reads like this: **"When our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said, 'Repent ye,' he meant that the whole life of the believer should be summed up with the word 'repentance'!"**

But still we all like to exclaim from time to time, don't we: **"There's nothing wrong with me!"**

This is certainly how it seems **for Cain in the words of our Old Testament** lesson today taken from the **4th chapter of Genesis**; the 4th chapter of the Bible! **God himself sees that there are some preliminary winds starting to blow out there upon the seas of Cain's troubled life in respect to his relationship with this brother Abel.**

God, who was hoping to head things off at the pass in Cain's life, is also the God who likes to head things off at the pass in your life and my life too! He is the God who confronts Cain saying: *"Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it"* (Genesis 4:6-7)!

The next thing you know, however, is that **Cain's heart remains unchanged and Cain rises up and kills Abel.** When the LORD says to Cain, *"Where is Abel your brother?"* He says, *"I don't know! Am I my brother's keeper?"*

Wow! These words are very different aren't they than the words that 35th President of the United States, President Kennedy spoke in his inaugural address there in Washington DC on January 20, 1961. On that day, JFK proclaimed: **"And so my fellow Americans: ask now what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country! My fellow citizens of the world: Ask not what American will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man!"**

Yes, in God's execution of his divine justice upon Cain, God speaks to him words that are actually quite similar to the words God spoke to his father Adam some years before this that resulted in his father and mother being expelled from the Garden of Eden. Here God is also telling Cain that **ORGANIC GARDENDING** is going to be a much tougher proposition in his life than it had ever been before! And the Bible also tells us that God said to Cain: *"And you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth!"*

Cain replies: *"My punishment is greater than I can bear! And others who see me will want to kill me!"* But the LORD God said to him, *"Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him" (Genesis 4:13-15)! --* What sage words of wisdom and divine revelation these are, these words that now pour forth from Cain's own mouth to any of the creatures who may have heard what Cain was trying to say: *"My punishment is greater than I can bear" (v. 13)!*

Cain's punishment would mean, in part, that Cain was now going to become completely ostracized from the people with whom he had been living! And yet there is still a note of God's grace here that will be at work in Cain's life—there is a mark that the LORD God would place upon him that would prevent Cain's fellowman from killing him.

"There is nothing wrong with me!" can be a dangerous thing to say!

Spiritually speaking, it is probably the worst thing a person could ever say! For a person to stand before God and say, **“There’s nothing wrong with me”** is totally incompatible with the most basic tenets of the Christian faith! A **Christian is a person who stands before God, just like that repentant tax collector** did in Jesus’ parable in our Gospel lesson today, admitting: **“God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13)!**

The parable that Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson this morning is also a **good sermon text for the beginning of LENT – that seven-week penitential season just before we celebrate the glorious resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday.**

The words of our Gospel lesson today are always very appropriate for us to consider also on **ASH WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST DAY OF LENT. Ash Wednesday is that day when we are all invited to return to the very day of our baptism;** when something was said to be true of us that we aren’t always willing to proclaim to the whole world as being true of us. It’s those words of the baptismal liturgy, **“We also learn from the Word of God that we all are conceived and born sinful and so are in need of forgiveness. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. But he Father of all mercy and grace has sent his Son Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sin of the whole world that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (LW, page 199; Ephesians 2:1-7; John 3:16-17)!**

Ash Wednesday and the whole Lenten Season reminds us that there are basically two different types of people in this world! There is the one type whose repeated mantra is: “There is nothing wrong with me!” And the second type of people are those whose whole-hearted confession is: “There is everything wrong with me!” St. Luke tells us that Jesus was specifically directing this story to people *“who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9)!*

*“Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me;
And that thou bidd’st me come to thee; O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

*Just as I am thou wilt receive; Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse relieve;
Because thy promise, I believe; O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

*Just as I am, thy love unknown, hath broken every barrier down;
Now to be thine, yea, thine alone! O Lamb of God, I come, I come. Amen*