**Eleventh Sunday after Trinity**

**Luke 18:9-14**

***True Righteousness***

His prayer was arrogant, but it wasn’t inaccurate. Arrogance isn’t always the opposite of truth. “I thank You, God, that I am not like other men” The Pharisee led an upright, moral, and commendable life. He lived a life we, as Christians and good citizens, should desire and strive to live. He supported charity. He was not promiscuous. He was not a lawbreaker. Any parent would breathe a sigh of relief to have a child who lives like a Pharisee. Even Scripture commends the lifestyle of the Pharisee:

Quoting Psalm 34, St. Peter writes:  1 Peter 3:10–11 (ESV)

**10**“Whoever desires to love life and see good days,

let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit;

**11**     let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it.”

But our commendation of the Pharisee’s life is based purely on those things the eyes can see. In his heart dwelt that deadly sin of pride and its manifestation as arrogance. Which Jesus Himself condemned: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.”

The most obvious way that a man exalts himself is to boast like the Pharisee. “I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.” Such shallow attempts to make oneself righteous must be denounced. Hence St. Paul to the Romans:

Romans 3:20 (ESV)  For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. And to the Galatians:

Galatians 3:10 (ESV) For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

The problem with the Pharisee was not his fasting or tithing, nor was it in shunning other lawless deeds like taking advantage of his neighbors, adultery, or giving in to greed. The problem was that the Pharisee thought that he was righteous enough, that his outward goodness was enough to earn God’s favor, and that whatever failings he had were insignificant compared to other people and therefore he was the best candidate to be loved by God.

That’s not to say he didn’t enjoy a good life. In striving to live a life according to the Law of God, he enjoyed a life of peace and health. There is no real or lasting pleasure in sin even for sinners. The proof of this lies in the biographies and Barbara Walters interviews of celebrities who lived infamous lives of depravity. They say it themselves: ‘The money, spending and possessions, the sex, drugs, and rock and roll left me always seeking more, and when that wasn’t enough, I sought a more dangerous high until I crashed and hit rock bottom. Learn from my example and lead a clean life.’

Everyone knows deep down, no matter how hard we try to deny it: we are the happiest and feel the most fulfilled, not when we live in sin and do those things we don’t want our grandma to catch us doing, but when we live upright and generous lives. Blessed, in this life at least, is the man who doesn’t know what a hangover feels like, who has never had to worry about diseases he picked up, who has never been beaten up or arrested.

But, of course, that is not enough for true blessedness. True blessedness isn’t simply the good life promised by obeying the Law. True blessedness is in the righteousness bestowed by Christ on sinners. If you get to pick what sort of a man to be between the Pharisee with honor in the community and a steady job and the Tax Collector of public shame afraid to be near others during prayer in the Temple, pick the Tax Collector. He went home justified because He confessed His sins before the mercy seat, because He trusted in God to cover him, to receive him by grace, to forgive him. And God did. That is what the Temple was for and that is why the Temple veil is destroyed. Nothing can keep us from God’s mercy. It is open to men and women, Jews and Gentiles, to tax collectors, prostitutes, and Pharisees.

The Church has deliberately chosen the Tax Collector for her model of prayer. His actions in the parable are precisely why we typically bow our heads and close our eyes and fold our hands in prayer. We come before God as sinners in need of mercy. We do not trust in ourselves or our works. If we are righteous, it is not our righteousness but Christ’s righteousness that has been bestowed upon us as a gift through His death and our Baptism.

The Christian, the new man raised up from the font strives to be the tax collector in his repentance and faith, not in his theft. He goes down to his house justified means more than he was let off the hook for all the bad stuff, that He got to have his cake and eat it too. It means that he went home changed, to start anew. We expect, in fact, that in an outward way he began from that point forward to look, like the Pharisee: fasting to train his flesh, tithing in compassion for the poor and desire that God’s Kingdom be expanded. Striving in all areas of life to resist evil, and to do good.

Luke records this parable in chapter 18. In chapter 19 he tells us about another tax collector convert: Zacchaeus the wee little man and climber of sycamore trees. When Jesus came to his house, Zacchaeuas received Him joyfully, and in the freedom of the Gospel pledged to give half of all his goods to the poor and to restore fourfold all that was ill-gotten. Jesus said to Him “Today salvation has come to this house.” Both tax collectors are saved, or justified, in their houses, that is, how they live their lives. The Gospel changes them. It delivers not just the outward peace and satisfaction of the good life, but it gives an abundant life, a life lived with God, by His Law, in repentance and faith, in service to neighbor, with joy. In thanksgiving for the salvation won on the Cross and delivered in Word and Sacrament, we are glad to do those things laid out in God’s Law. On this side of glory, you still struggle to do those things pleasing to God, but take heart: Because you are a new creation in Christ you are not under the law, but are under grace. You are forgiven, you are justified, you are freed from the curse of the Law. You are reborn in your inner person, baptized, and saved. You aren’t merely justified for the Last Day. You are justified to go home, to live in this world as well as the next.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.