

Trinity XI

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[0 : 00] May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Please be seated.

I invite us all to take a moment, before we consider our Gospel text, to think about the outcasts, particularly of our society. What kind of life do they live? What kind of profession would they have? Are these people outcasts because of something they did or said? How do they understand themselves in this world? I imagine that we can all think of something. Now let's take a moment to consider those in our society we consider esteemed, those we may see as great people. What kind of life do they live? What kind of jobs, what kind of profession do they have? How do they see themselves in this world? These kinds of questions are the kinds of things that our Gospel text is imploring us to think about.

However, our Lord is not calling us to think about how we see others, but rather how we see and understand ourselves. Do we see ourselves as one of the greats, as someone a step above everyone else, in terms of approaching God?

[1 : 23] Or do we recognize the things that we lack, asking God to be merciful to us because of our shortcomings? If we aren't currently seeing ourselves as better people and more deserving of God's mercy than the rest of the world, I can imagine that we've all fallen into this way of thinking before.

What is presented to us in the Gospel of St. Luke today is the true path towards humility and exaltation. In our Psalm recitation, we read of the petition towards God to do good to those who are good and to those who are upright in heart.

Those who turn aside to their crooked ways, the Lord shall lead them away with the workers of iniquity. The final phrase in Psalm 125 is a declaration that peace be upon Israel.

This declaration of peace is a kind of complete peace, one that does not have any hint of deceit or wrong motives for acting or for speaking. Turning back to our Gospel, we see that the two individuals in the text, the Pharisee and the publican, are examples of one who are upright in heart and one who has turned aside to crookedness.

However, the way that Jesus develops the story is different than what one would have thought during this time period. We have a key as to why Jesus tells his parable because there were some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and they despised others.

[2 : 52] The Pharisee, one would assume, would be the righteous person. After all, he was the teacher of the law. According to his own self-description, he actually did more than what was required by the law.

He fasted twice a week and he gave tithes of everything that he possessed. Surely this man would have been the righteous one. On the other side, we have the tax collector.

This was a particularly hated class of people. Tax collectors in this area would have been Jewish. Since the tax collecting system was for the publicans or the high-ups to hire indigenous people to collect taxes and then give them all to the head.

And since the publican only cared about receiving his due, the tax collector had free reign to keep the extra money that was not owed to the publican. This provided opportunity for all kinds of economic injustice, especially since it was a Jewish person taking advantage of other Jewish people for their money.

If we remember, there are quite a few condemnations of the rich taking advantage of the poor from God in the Old Testament. Not only that, but strict Israelites were further offended by the fact that tax collectors had to maintain continual contracts with non-Israelites in the course of their work.

[4 : 11] They were in contact with the foreigners who were in charge of receiving the taxes they collected. This continued contract with the non-Israelites kept an Israelite tax collector ceremonially unclean.

This would explain why the other disciples were surprised that Jesus called Matthew, an Israelite tax collector, to be one of his disciples. Given our understanding of these two types of individuals, it should seem obvious that Jesus would condemn an Israelite tax collector and praise a Pharisee in any circumstance.

However, that is not what we see play out in our gospel. The problem that we see with the Pharisee is his self-righteousness that he expresses in his prayer.

First, he thanks God that he's not like the lowly sinners, the extortioners, the unjust, adulterers, or even this tax collector. Not only that, but he gives reasons for why he is righteous.

He fasts twice a week and gives a tithe of everything he owns, which is more than what the law requires him to do. In their own right, doing these things, fasting twice a week and giving tithes of everything that you own, they would be good things.

[5 : 25] The problem is that the Pharisee sees himself as justified in the eyes of God because of the things that he is doing. The Pharisee sees himself as his redeemer, not God as his redeemer.

This is a false kind of peace, especially since he's slandering the tax collector, not the peace expressed in Psalm 125. The tax collector, on the other hand, stands far off from the temple.

He knows his actions against God and against others. In fact, he's probably standing far off because he knows he's ceremonially unclean by being in continual contract with the foreigners. Instead of blaming his situation on other people, he beats his breast and asks God to be merciful to him because he is a sinner. Our Lord says that it was not the Pharisee who went home justified, but it was the tax collector.

Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled by God and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted by God.

[6 : 28] This is the key. Exaltation in the eyes of God does not come from us raising up ourselves and looking down upon others as we see inferior to ourselves.

Rather, it is understanding who we are as Christians, people who have been baptized, because we were in the need of God's forgiveness and are still in need of God's forgiveness when we do sin. What we do in this life, God will do the opposite in the next. If we accept our role as a servant and we suffer in this life, we will be exalted by God.

Jesus Christ's exaltation being our example and hope for our own future. If we exalt ourselves in this life, we will experience great loss and God will humble us.

We do not want that. The right time to have humility is now. If the God of heaven can humble himself to become incarnate and to die on a cross, the most humiliating form of death, we can humble ourselves and carry our cross with Jesus.

[7 : 36] As a way of making this practical, we can take any opportunity of seeing someone do something bad as a time for self-reflection. When we see something bad in the news or we hear about someone else telling us something about the news, we can beat our breast and say, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.

When someone does something taboo or wrongs us, we can be ready to forgive and we can remember that we are also in need of mercy. God's work of creation was not finished on the sixth day, for he sustains us in all things, holding all things in existence for all ages.

Who are we that God should cast his gaze down upon us? We are people made in his image in need of God's sustaining power and mercy. When you see the outcast, think about Jesus Christ, the one who came to his own and was also rejected as the greatest outcast.

Jesus Christ came to redeem the sick and the lost, not the healthy and proud. Remembering our own infirmities is the surest path towards true strength, holiness, and righteousness.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.