

Sermon notes for Proper 25

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Joel 2:23-32](#) / [Psalm 65](#) / [2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18](#) / [Luke 18:9-14](#)

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

The Wrong End of the Telescope

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Someone told my spiritual director recently that he simply must be a more naturally faithful Christian than many. What could be a more easy assumption? My spiritual director is a professed member of a religious community, he knows more than most about spirituality and the Church, he's sought after for counsel and prayer.

But my spiritual director laughed. "No," he responded to his directee, "You might be the more naturally faithful Christian. I'm the one who needs the Rule, the robes, the disciplines and accountability of religious community to be faithful in prayer, study, and service. . . because if I were left to my own devices, I'd do none of it!"

I suffer a similar vocational hazard. As a priest, I can often fall into the trap of being treated like the model Christian, the most naturally faithful person on earth. Woe is the day I believe it, because the exact opposite may be true. Maybe the truth is I need the discipline and accountability, the robes and constraints of office and orders, more time in and around the Church than most, to learn to be truly faithful! Many of you do quite well as faithful Christians with Sunday worship, a check-up during the week, and prayers as you go about the ministries of your daily work. In this way you are much more naturally faithful than I!

And how we regular church-goers too often think we are better than the majority of a society that stays home! But, in fact, quite the reverse might be true - we church-goers may simply need all this more than a lot of people do to keep our lives together!

Today's gospel turns our view of the Christian enterprise of faith around 180 degrees yet again. It's almost as though we, like the Pharisee, keep looking through the wrong end of the telescope at the world. We forget too easily that we are not here to judge the world around us -- that's God's job after all -- but we're rather here to profess the truth of our deep need for a God who loves us into our full humanity. . . if only we will let that grace in. The tax collector gets it right -- he is more justified before God in Jesus' eyes -- because he discloses his own need for redemption in his prayers, rather than counting his virtues and comparing himself with others.

While the author of Luke mercifully has Christ offering a gloss to disclose the intended meaning, Jesus' teaching in today's parable probably bewildered his first followers. Pharisees, after all, were the good religious folk, the ones most carefully faithful to every moral stricture and worship practice. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were pariahs, notorious for dishonesty and their connection to oppressive elites and Roman occupation. Yet the tax collector goes home

justified. As is typical of many parables, Jesus seems to say to his audience, "Go figure!" God's sense is clearly not ours.

Jesus reminds his disciples and all the faithful that we often, in our rush to judgment, see the world upside-down. . . through the wrong end of the telescope. We can often reckon ourselves better than those outside the walls of our sanctuaries, determine our attendance and membership here is making us somehow superior to our secular neighbors. Jesus knows that pride is always close at hand when religion slips into religiosity and spirituality quietly morphs into sectarianism. Our danger is just like the Pharisee's in today's gospel: we can easily baptize the competitive culture we inhabit and spend our prayers comparing ourselves with others, end up quietly nursing a sense of our own superiority before our God.

None of this justifies us in the eyes of God, for the simple reason that none of it is true, none of it is real. Looking through the wrong end of the spiritual telescope renders us unable to see the fullness of God's universe. We end up with a distorted understanding, at best, of not only our neighbors, but ourselves. To God, when we boast of being better than others, we are each like the proverbial emperor with no clothes. We, naked and fully seen by our Creator, barely can perceive our own true selves let alone the true selves around us. As Paul puts it, we see ourselves so dimly that it is our supposed certainties about ourselves that probably constitute the greatest danger to our faith!

Religious communities have forever warned their members of the sin of spiritual pride, of self-righteousness masquerading as fidelity. We all struggle with the arrogant Christian, the Pharisee within. The moment we claim we have "arrived" in God's favor is the moment we stop growing in grace, the day in a profound sense we turn towards spiritual death rather than life.

We are here this morning because we all recognize at some level that we harbor some brokenness, we all know we have fallen short of God's vision for us. We are here because we need this faith community to love and support us in Christ's healing of our essential selves. We need the relationship offered here and embodied in one another and the sacraments to knock off our rough edges and open us to God's Spirit at work. We need the mirrors we hold up for one another to see the real selves we are called to offer to God in hope and humility.

The tax collector admits his brokenness in today's story, allowing God to enter and transform him. The Pharisee, praying as though God is only a reflection of his own judgments about the world around him, shields himself from God's true judgment. Most of us are both Pharisee and tax collector at various times in the Christian journey. Part of living into the salvation we have been given is learning to choose each day to follow the way of humility, the way of the tax collector, of acknowledging our fundamental need for God to bring us towards wholeness. And we all know being vulnerable like this to God regularly is among the hardest of our spiritual tasks.

But when we are most like the tax collector, most open as we confess, admit, and disclose; most honest as we touch the most fragile places in our own lives and offer them, we discover who our God truly is. For ours is a God whose judgment is not the world's judgment. We experience then God's judgment then in that most precious of naked moments, naked before our Creator. . . We experience God's judgment as an abundance of mercy, a mercy that justifies us and clothes us with an infinite grace.