FROM THE PULPIT
North Shore Congregational Church

"Thank You, God – That I'm Just Like Them!"

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Luke 3: 15-22; Luke 18: 9-14

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So, those of you who are not tuned in to Facebook, or other modes of social media, may not be entirely familiar with the concept of a 'meme.' A meme is, simply, a single image (of just about anything) that has words placed on it in some fashion or another. Some are comical, some are satirical, some are political, some are meant to be challenging, inspiring, critical, and so on. Anyway, the most prolific usage of these is on Facebook – and the truth is that I tend to ignore the vast majority of them. But, there was one that caught my eye a few weeks ago, and I really haven't been able to shake it, ever since.

I don't even recall exactly what the image was, because it was the words that leapt off the screen as I was scrolling by. It was the words of the question that we read as out words of meditation this morning – a question I'm not sure I've ever quite considered (at least in the manner in which it was put forth in this particular presentation). "Are you a Christian because you think you are better than everyone? Or, are you a Christian because you realize that you aren't?" Just let that sit for a minute. "Are you a Christian because you think you are better than everyone? Or, are you a Christian because you realize that you aren't?"

I think the truth, if we are genuinely honest about it, is that we fall into the first category far more often than we might like to admit. We're the ones that know the truth. We're the ones that have strong morals. We're the ones living the way we ought to live. We're the ones doing what we ought to do, saying what we ought to say, serving how we ought to serve, and altogether being that which ought to be as good people. Sure, we may have our missteps and misguided diversions now and

then. But, we're good people, and we live good lives. Because, after all, we're Christians!

I think the truth, if we are genuinely honest about it, is that we fall into the category of elevating ourselves due to our faithful 'status,' far more readily than we might even realize, and that we far too often forget that everything our faith is about, all that Christ represented and taught in his life, and all that he enabled and created in his death and resurrection, is because we aren't!

One of the great themes that rings across the Gospels is the theme of humility and self-awareness. From one circumstance and story to another, the Gospels are repeatedly trying to get us to step back from our self-aggrandizing pomposity, and take a true look at who and what we are. And, for me, few stories do that more powerfully than the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Luke recounts this parable as having taken place in a conversation between Jesus and some Pharisees. A bit earlier, the Pharisees had asked Jesus about the Kingdom of God. Jesus replied by explaining that they needed to stop looking for the Kingdom of God as something they were going to see or discover, and instead to understand that the Kingdom of God is 'within them' (those were the words that he used). Then he proceed to explain what he meant by that, in part, by sharing this parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

You have to picture this scene. Jesus sets the scene of these two men entering the temple to pray. On the one hand you have a Pharisee – the religious elite. These were leaders in the community, well-respected in the temple, and strict adherents to the Law. They had an extraordinarily legalistic understanding of Mosaic Law, and they took those understandings into every aspect of their lives. In their minds, they lived how they should live – they were everything they ought to be as a good and faithful child of God. On the other hand, you have a tax collector – a schemer. These people had a job of collecting money for the Romans, but they made their living by collecting extra and extorting the Jews. So, they while they were Jewish themselves, they were despised and seen as among the most deceitful and deleterious of characters.

So, that's what is so powerful about this story. As the men enter the temple to pray, the scene opens with the Pharisee marching right up to the front of the temple (you almost get this image of the Pharisee willing to march up and stand right in the face of God) and he begins his prayer. 'God, I thank you that I am not like

other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

Just as the Pharisee's boasting reaches a fever pitch, the scene pans over to that miserable, scheming, good-for-nothing tax-collector. He's so bad, he's not even willing to approach God. He's so detestable, he's not even willing to come near the place of the Pharisee. No, that miserable, scheming, good-for-nothing tax collector is standing way at the back, barely willing to even enter the room, beating his chest and crying out to God, simply, 'Be merciful to me, a sinner!' "I tell you," Jesus goes on to say, "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other!"

Are you a Christian because you think you are a better than everyone? Or, are you a Christian because you realize that you aren't?

Today is the Sunday, in the liturgical calendar, which points us towards the event of Jesus' baptism. It's a fascinating event to consider. John the Baptist has been proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. He has been preaching to people, and baptizing them, for quite some time, and has even spoken of the truth that he is not even worthy to untie the sandals of this Savior who is coming. John has a profound concept of the lordship and glory of Jesus – he preaches that glory to others to prepare the way has God has called him to do so – but then Jesus shows up and what we expect to happen doesn't happen.

Jesus enters this scenario with John and his followers, and we have every expectation that Jesus will turn around and start preaching, leading, and even baptizing John and the others. Finally the one they've been waiting for arrives, and we assume that he is going to take the reins and start ministering to all of those people. But, what happens? John baptizes Jesus! In this striking and somewhat discombobulating reversal of roles, Jesus submits himself to John in that moment as John baptizes the very One who had come to save us all. I love, in fact, the way Luke presents the story with such simplicity, "When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him…"

I love that presentation, in Luke's gospel, because I think the simplicity and 'matter-of-factness' of the way he tells the stories speaks to the very power of the event. Jesus was baptized by John. The very child we celebrated at Christmas, the one the Magi travelled endlessly to find, the one born to save the people from their sins, the one born to be Immanuel, the man so glorious that John wasn't even

worthy to tie his sandals – that man, that Lord, that Immanuel, that savior and king knelt down in the river to be baptized by John just like everyone else. And, that was only the beginning.

This is the man who went about eating with sinners and tax collectors. This was the man who allowed that sinful woman to bathe his feet. This was the man who called Zacchaeus out of tree and called us to fill our banquet tables with the downtrodden and forgotten. This is the man who knelt down at the feet of his disciples and, despite their ardent objections, like a servant to his master's guests, washed their feet. He was Immanuel, he was the savior of us all, he was our Lord and King – and he didn't miss a beat when it came to humbling himself – and then he proceeded to climb upon the cross, bare the weight of our sins on his shoulders, pay the price for our transgressions, and die, that we might live. And, then we turn around and boast of our faithfulness, trumpet our righteousness and bloviate on our moral character – every day so readily falling to the spirit of that Pharisee and proclaiming in different ways, 'Thank you, God, that I'm not like them.'

Are you a Christian because you think you are a better than everyone? Or, are you a Christian because you realize that you aren't? As much as we may tend to build ourselves up, at times, I think the story of Jesus becoming just like everyone else and humbling himself to be baptized by John is his powerful and stark embodiment of exactly that which he seeks to teach us in the parable – that the one who went home justified was not the self-righteous Pharisee, but the man who knows of his own frailties and counts on the grace and love of God to overcome them.

As much as we may fall to that tendency to proclaim, 'Thank you, God, that I'm not like them.' The entire Ministry of Jesus, and the cornerstone of our faith, is that we ought to be coming to God and proclaiming, 'Thank you, God, that I'm just like them!'

- 'Thank you, God, that, like them, despite my feeble mind and frail will, I can depend on your limitless grace in my life!'
- 'Thank you, God, that, like them, I can rest in the assurance of your mercy and know that my misdeeds will not define my today, my tomorrow, or my eternity!'
- 'Thank you, God, that, like them, I can trust in your boundless and endless love in my life regardless of what choices I make, what wayward routes I travel and what temptations I give in to.'
- 'Thank you, God, that, just like them, it doesn't matter where I've been, what I've done, or even who I've been, because Jesus humbled himself to the point of the cross, and I am your child no matter what.'

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector faced this very same question – and it was that miserable, scheming, good-for-nothing tax collector that got it right! Are you a Christian because you think you are a better than everyone? Or, are you a Christian because you realize that you aren't?