

A *PHARISEE* AND A *PUBLICAN*

February 18, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

In the parable you just heard, Jesus made a vivid contrast between the behavior of two widely divergent characters, a *Pharisee* and a *Publican*, and in so doing turned upside down the assumed values of the culture and replaced them with the values of God's kingdom, and he *shocked* the people who heard him.

A Pharisee was a person of status and respectability who knew the religious rules and had the resources to keep those rules. To be called a Pharisee was a guarantee of general approval. The other man in the story is a tax collector, or *publican*, a gatherer of public monies. In the New Testament the title refers not to the top man who organized the levying of taxes, but to a lesser group of Jewish officials who actually *collected* the taxes. If we sometimes look with disdain upon IRS agents, the tax collectors were looked upon with horror. They were traitors whose work supported the Roman Empire. They gorged upon their own people with extortion and fraud. They were despised and equated with public sinners, and kept at a distance by every observer of Jewish law, except one, *Jesus*.

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The Pharisee offered a prayer of thanksgiving, a thanksgiving that was mainly self-congratulatory, grateful that he could claim to be better than other people, better than the Publican. He was praying with himself, trusting in his own self-righteousness, and seeing little need for God's justification. The Publican *couldn't* pray with himself. He was unfit to pray with *anybody*. There was, however, one thing he could do, no matter how unworthy he was. He could talk to God and so he did, saying, *God, be merciful to me a sinner.*

Who goes home justified? There is something in all of us, I believe, that rejoices in, and yet literally cringes at the answer Jesus gives in the parable as to who goes home justified: the hated and detested one and *not* the self-proclaimed man of high society.

Why do we have trouble with this? We have trouble with this because, while we understand the thrust of the parable with our minds, our hearts have a need to believe just the opposite. We

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long to see ourselves approved of in the eyes of other people. We spend our days preening ourselves before the mirror of their opinion so we will not have to think about appearing before them naked and uncombed. We will never be completely free until we are dead to the whole business of justifying ourselves.

The tragedy of all self-righteousness, Christian or otherwise, is that the main concern of the one doing the judging is that she or he sees the unrighteousness ones in terms of what *they are not*, rather than for who *they are* and what *they might become*. There is no compassion here. This is contrary to God's love and the values of the kingdom. We have to see others with God's eye of non-judgment. We need the mature openness of Jesus. Yet, it was that trait in him that many of his detractors considered unpardonable and scandalous. This openness, especially to the traitors, the swindlers, the moral failures of the world, this openness in the converting tenderness that Jesus embodied in *his own* life, and of which he speaks in the parable, was offensive to them. It wasn't that Jesus merely *forgave* these disreputable

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people, but, may the Saints preserve us, he *associated with them*.

Where did this capacity to love come from, this love that is so hard to fathom, let alone accept? It came from the sure and certain knowledge that God *alone* justifies. God renders sinners just, makes them right, tenderly and genuinely, and sets them free, not in virtue of the good works they *cannot* fall back on, nor in observance of the morality they *don't* live by, but in the strength of the Lord's unmerited grace. Ironically, it is just the sinner's own recognition that they are without merit that opens them to receive the gift of acceptance which self-righteousness, by its very definition, will not allow. The being of God revealed in Jesus is the opposite of judgment. It is *mercy*.

In another setting, when Jesus tells some men, secure in their *own* righteousness, who are deadly serious about making sure a woman caught in adultery never does it again, he tells them, *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first one to throw a stone at her* (Jn. 8:7). One by one they drop their stones and walk away. Jesus accepted the woman, not on principle, but

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because he felt tender compassion for her and with her. In this care and concern he would not condemn her and tells her *from now on do not sin again* (Jn. 8:11b).

Likewise, Jesus beckons us to drop the stones of self-righteousness and contempt for others and go to our homes made right, *justified* by the one whose love makes all our attempts at self-justification seem like no more than a fleeting mist of the dawning day.

AMEN.