

Sermon – 10.27.19  
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church,  
Los Osos, CA

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Ecumenical Sunday  
**Text:** Luke 18:9-14

**Purpose:** We recognize both the Pharisee and the toll collector, both the saint and the sinner within ourselves.

**Prayer:** Guard my lips and guide our hearts, O God, our help and our rock.

Some days everything goes right. Some days everything goes wrong!  
Some mornings we awake and say "Good morning, God."  
Other days it's more like, "Good God, it's morning."

On those good days, it's sunshine and blue skies, no traffic ahead of you, people treating you like royalty. On those other days, there's gloom and disaster....your soup spills on your favorite blouse or tie, co-workers frown or glare at you for some unknown reason, or, worse, for a reason you know only too well! Thankfully for us, most days tend to fall somewhere between these extremes. Because a steady diet of either could leave us incredibly arrogant or deeply depressed!

There appears to be this dual quality to human existence. Scriptures attest to it...sages provide wisdom for it. Martin Buber acknowledged it and observed: "Our spiritual natures seem to have two "pockets." When we reach into one pocket, we pull out smallness. We are "dust and ashes." Reaching into our other pocket, we find greatness. This complex, two-fold nature of humanity brings us to our knees sometimes. Out of HUMILITY, we ask God, "Who are humans that you, God, are mindful of us?" And yet, we know also contains the equal truth that God created human beings little lower than the angels. Martin Luther said we are all saints and we are all sinners. ALL FALL SHORT of the glory of God.

Today I am grateful we are celebrating *Ecumenical Sunday*.  
I think we are coming closer to Jesus' prayer, *that they may all be one*.

"Ecumenical" is one of those inclusive words, known & loved by some of us more than others. A humorous illustration comes from Diane Butler Bass who tweeted last week: "[I] Preached a gratitude stemwinder this morning in a Methodist church. A woman in the greeting line told me that it was a while since she'd heard a Baptist preacher. I liked telling her that I'm an Episcopalian." (DBB Tweet 10/16/19)

Consulting our resident Greek scholar, (aka Jerry Walton) I've learned that "ecumenical" comes from the root word "oikos" meaning house, family, or household. It may also refer to a cave, a temple, a palace, or a **grave**. It seems appropriate, for those of us who claim to be followers of one who was born in something likely similar to a cave, then became homeless for much of his adult life, then was placed in a borrowed grave after his execution. I think "ecumenical" fits Jesus' life and death, and (probably) resurrection, as well. In its broadest sense, "ecumenical" includes all the residents of God's household – begging the question... Who is included in the household of God? Is it not presumptuous of us to think we know? Brother David Steindl-Rast suggested, "We Christians have no monopoly on the Holy Spirit." (In the Foreward to Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.)

("Oikoumene" in Greek )-"Ecumenical" refers to the inhabited world. This is about as broad as it gets. In my opinion, Christians who believe themselves to be better than religion x, y, or z – you can fill in your own blanks, do themselves and other Christians, a gross disservice. Fear of what we do not know about other religions, keeps some folks in a constant state of agitation, guarding against learning something new or meeting someone who might threaten their comfortable mindset. The religions of the world do share much in common. One of those is the need to attend to prayer or meditation regularly. Some of you have visited countries where those reminders of prayer time are very present in everyday life. I've talked to folks who've lamented the removal of bell towers from church steeples in the rural U.S. They missed the ringing of the bells as reminders that it's time to pray.

The chapter we've just heard from Luke begins with Jesus' admonition to pray always and not to lose heart. Luke wrote for an audience learning to be Christian years after Jesus died. He records the story Jesus tells about the religious Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee, a religious over-achiever, feels contempt for those unlike himself, so his prayer of thanksgiving is offered in the proper posture, thanking God that he is not like others around him, in particular, the hated toll collector who was praying in the Temple at the same time, standing off by himself because he knew of his unworthiness.

A word about “HUMILITY.” Madeleine L’Engle’s definition is terrific: “Humility is throwing oneself away in complete concentration on something or *someone else*.” I recall from Caro+’s sermon about St. Benedict that humility ranked high on his list. A person who lived his life in great humility was honored this past week, Rep. Elijah Cummings. (One of the rare persons in politics who seemed to make everyone better when he was around!)

Back to Luke! That “other” person, the toll collector, knew he didn’t measure up. He was not a perfect example of God’s creation. Luke says he didn’t even stand close to the others, nor did he dare even look toward heaven. Rather he beat his breasts (a practice usually reserved for women in the day...it was only men in extreme anguish who prayed in this manner)... He prayed: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner*—a prayer any of us can use at any time.

The 1<sup>st</sup> century Pharisee, says John J. Pilch (The Cultural World of Jesus, Cycle C) is generally misunderstood by most of us who’ve acquired our information about them from the New Testament.

The Pharisee was one of a number of factions in Jesus time. They formed a “fellowship” (Haburah in Hebrew). The members practiced distinctive observances of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and tithing! Pilch also says the Greek word most often translated as “tax collector” can describe three categories of people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century:

- 1) those who purchased the right from government to collect specific taxes
- 2) supervisory officials and regional directors (Zacchaeus is a well-known example as a “chief” collector).
- 3) employees or agents who collected indirect taxes through tolls at major transport and commercial centers like Jericho.

The third group were employees who did not set the rate of the taxes. They were the ones, however, who were most highly visible in their jobs, the ones disgruntled folks could blame and spit upon! The one praying in Jesus’ parable was a TOLL collector, a member of the third group. And, with his fellow agents responded most positively to both John and Jesus! This person, Jesus says, went to his home justified. He knew he needed God. The Pharisee had everything sewed up so well by himself. One gets the impression he is quite pleased with his inner religious superman.

Is this story about prayer? Is it about justice? Is it about human relations? YES! (All of the above). Here is a story of divine reversal, indeed. God's eyes do not see the same perspective as human eyes.

A story might help to illustrate this phenomenon.

During WWI, Elzeard Bouffier's wife and son were killed. His home mostly destroyed. He sought comfort in being by himself. He went back to his land in France, once a beautiful countryside, now nothing but trees destroyed and murky rivers. Bouffier became convinced the land needed the plants once again. He began planting trees daily. After 50 years, the oaks, the birches and maples slowly took root and matured. The earth responded. Where there had been erosion, now stood tall forests. Streams ran with clear water. First farms, then entire communities became transformed.

Where Mr. Bouffier intended to cut himself off from his fellow humans because of his grief, God intended that he become a catalyst for transformation. He brought new possibility of life out of death, even though he thought he had only one pocket.

What might we discover when we reach into both of our spiritual pockets?

Let the people of God say, "Amen!"