

“May the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.” *Psalm 19:14*

I want to thank Father Joshua for the opportunity to address the parish this morning. This is my first attempt at a sermon, so please bear with me.

I’d like to start by introducing myself. For those of you who do not know me, I am Linda Winnard. I joined this parish in August of last year after moving from Chicago to southern California. I am what many people might call a Snowbird – I spend the winter months in the Palm Desert and the summer months in the South Bay of the LA area. Since I do not fly back and forth between my homes, but rather brave the highways, I refer to myself as a Roadrunner instead of a Snowbird. I am also a cradle Episcopalian, baptized in the late 50s in Rhode Island, confirmed in 1970 in Taiwan, and reaffirmed in Chicago in 1989. I was drawn to this parish because I could see St Michael’s had something in common with my previous church communities: an Episcopal liturgy, a personality rooted in its members, and a warm leader as its rector. It is a vibrant community of seasoned parishioners who welcome and include a variety of people. It has not taken long for me to feel at home here. I thank all of you for extending a warm welcome and embracing me.

Today’s Gospel comes from the book of Luke. It is known as the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector. When I was a Sunday school teacher in Chicago, I guided meditations on parables with elementary school aged children. Sometimes,

I would guide the children in looking at the same parable in different books of the Gospel to emphasize point of view. Although this parable is found only in the book of Luke, it is widely known.

So what is a parable? In simple terms, it is a story within a story that invites us to wonder and see things from different angles. They are stories told to us by Jesus about God's love, the Kingdom of Heaven, and our relationships with each other. When reading from the Bible, I like to light a candle to remind me that the Word is given to us from God and serves to guide us. Jesus used parables to give us every day examples that enable us to connect our own experiences with scripture through spiritual reflection. As I led meditations on the same parables year after year, I learned from the children that there is more than one lesson in every parable. I also saw that the same children had different takes on the readings over the course of the three years I worked with them. In short, I saw them grow as individuals and I saw the Word at work in them. This caused me to reflect on how I have grown and what my own experience has been with this parable.

There are two types of people in this story -- the Pharisees and the Tax Collectors. The Pharisees were members of a religious group that were very devout in observing the Laws of the Torah. Pharisees were so devout, they could be identified by their clothing. Pharisees made a public display of their religious devotion. On the other hand, the tax collectors served the Romans who ruled Israel during the time of Jesus. Not only did they collect money on behalf of the Roman

oppressors, often times they requested bribes or extorted money for their own behalf from others. As you can imagine, tax collectors might have been dreaded in society, viewed as shady outcasts. Pharisees on the other hand might have been exalted in society as upstanding citizens. Yet, today the word Pharisee can conjure up negative images of someone who is self-righteous, hypocritical, self-absorbed. Why? A Pharisee feels superior to everyone else. And today, the tax collector can conjure up positive images of one who is truly humble because he repents publicly. Why? A tax collector feels inferior to everyone else. I would suggest that both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector suffer from distortions in pride – the Tax Collector suffers from shame - a form of pride in reverse. Both men are praying to God and reveal their perceptions of self-value in opposing ways. Pride and shame are opposite sides of the same coin in this parable. Both men are concerned with self-exaggeration; this preoccupation with self keeps them from true connection with God and others.

So what is this parable about? Which type of person are you – a Pharisee or a Tax Collector? Who is God concerned with in this parable? Is it enough to pray and persevere in prayer? Is this parable about how to pray? Is this about how to be in relationship with God, others, and ourselves?

In my opinion, this parable invites us to see things from a wider perspective – from God's perspective if you will. It tells us that proper spirit and attitude are necessary in prayer and action. The tax collector and the Pharisee pray with their

hearts and show faithfulness. Yet, Jesus admonishes that it is not enough to simply take the action of prayer and to persist in those prayers. **How we pray** is of importance to God. How we pray transforms us and changes our actions. God is concerned with BOTH the Pharisee and the Tax Collector – it is not an “either/or” situation, but rather a “both/and” situation from God’s perspective. We are all God’s children in various stages of progress. God wants us to grow and evolve to be in true community with each other.

The tax collector sees his trespasses and asks for forgiveness. The Pharisee asks for nothing, boasts about his self-righteousness, demonstrates religious egotism, and revels in spiritual pride at the expense of others. The Tax Collector feels ashamed and retreats into hiding. He cannot even lift his head or eyes. In this parable, Jesus invites us to ponder how to balance our self-view between excess pride and excess inadequacy through humility. In doing so, we find true self-worth. To me, this parable demonstrates that humility and gratitude before God, respecting the dignity of others, becoming aware of and accepting our own strengths and weaknesses, are all necessary ingredients in pleasing and imitating God. God is delighted when we humble ourselves enough to connect as peers – when we connect with the dignity of each person in our midst.

How does this apply to me on a personal level? We evolve over time in our relationship with God and how we pray to God. At times in my life, I was the Pharisee – concerned with outward appearances, focused on public displays of

religious devotion in my church community, and obsessed with comparing myself to others as a measure of progress. At other times, I was the Tax Collector – working in corporate finance, teaching fortunate 500 companies about loopholes to avoid taxation or how to delay payments to maximize cashflow, and lining my pockets in the process. There was a huge disconnect between my life in the church and my life in the professional world. Yet, I could not see the hypocrisy of my thinking. My view of life with God was externalized when I behaved like the Pharisee in my religious practice and the Tax Collector in my professional pursuits. My prayers at that phase of life were petitions for “give me this, give me that, help me this, help me that.” I measured my righteousness with outward markers and outer behaviors. In exchange for my unconditional faith, God would reward me with fortunes and favor. I was unable to see that my pride as a Pharisee and material greed as a Tax Collector were getting in the way of my growth as a Christian because I was too wrapped up in self and worldly goals. My disposition told me lies about my standing as a Christian.

I did not understand the inward requirements of being in relationship with God, with self, and with others until later in life when I became a parent. I could not see myself clearly, or God’s desires clearly. I was lost among the trees in the woods. I could not see the forest for lack of perspective. I was self-absorbed. I thought a lot of myself and spent a lot of time thinking about myself. I could not see or sense the needs of those around me. This self-absorption set me apart from others

because I could not show up for others with compassion and caring. In hindsight, I now know my searching for more of this and more of that was really a yearning for more connection to God and others.

When I became a Sunday school teacher, my motivation was to gain recognition as a valued member of the church community. The spirit of my service was self-serving. However, the service itself changed me. Through faith and the example of children, I began to see weakness in my character. I began to relate to the children on a genuine, humble level. I began to learn from them and they learned from me. Through my connection to God, who loves me just as I am, I was able to begin to see and accept my flaws, and nurture a desire to grow and change. From the children, I learned how to be in proper relationship with God. I learned how to speak to God with the simplicity, purity, and sincerity of a child. My prayers became filled with gratitude for the gifts in my life. I began asking for guidance in uncertainty, asking for acceptance in difficulty, and asking how I could be helpful to God and others. By becoming childlike and listening to the whisper of God in my heart, I began to humbly relate to others by serving them and empathizing with them. My thinking changed, and my behavior and actions became consistent with my heart. My humility began to bleed into my relationships. This is walking in the path of Jesus – to walk with others, not ahead or behind others, but WITH others.

It's not just a humble heart that right sized me in relation to God, but the expression of that humility in service to the children transformed me from *being*

isolated with God to *being connected* to God through others. Now I can see the spark of God in others and learn from it. I can reflect my image of God and be of service to others by relating my experience to their experience as a peer. I can listen, empathize, and serve with a humble heart that does not have an expectation of reward or recognition. Through looking away from myself and towards service to others, I stopped seeing life as a journey TO God, and started to see it as a journey WITH God.

May we all draw nearer to God by walking in the humble ways of self-worth and service exemplified by Jesus.

AMEN