

Have Mercy On Me, A Sinner

A sermon by Deacon Cris South, Diocese of Hawai'i

The Reading:

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.*

¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

14. “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Luke 18:9-14 New International Version (NIV)

Today I was sitting in the car waiting for my beloved to finish a class. I had been reading *Stealing Jesus* by Bruce Bawer. And I had an epiphany. Looking out through the rain at the trees in the distance, I suddenly realized that if I am to be a true disciple of Christ, then I want to be the last one into heaven on that day of the great calling. I want to be last not because I am slow or unfinished, but because I was too busy lifting others up Jacob's ladder to worry about getting near the front of the line. I want to be so selfless that I give myself completely.

How far from that am I.

Jesus was very clear about what he – and God – expected from his human family. He expected us to be different in almost every way from those around us. The Pharisee in the reading above illustrated all that was (and is) wrong with *religion*. Jesus calls us to abandon *religion*, and instead embrace God and our fellow humans, finding the core of love, and then spend our lives giving it away without regard for ourselves.

Religion by itself fixes nothing and often adds greatly to the problem. What has been done in the name of *religion* is horrifying. Somewhere along the way, we lost sight of what we are called to be and do, and we started taking an easier way, the way of the walls and the pews, of dogma and rules, of insulation rather than invitation.

In order to protect ourselves and feel our own worth, we pushed those we considered to be unworthy aside and closed the doors of our safe churches, places we could sit and feel “holy” and sanctified, often at the grave expense of others.

I have said repeatedly that Christ never told us to go to church. He never called us to sit on our laurels and congratulate ourselves like the aforementioned Pharisee. In fact, he rejected everything the Pharisee was doing...being sanctimonious, haughty, proud, even self-delusional. He came to show all of us that this was not the way, no matter how many laws we obeyed, rules we made, or sacrifices we offered. No longer would the *sacrificial lamb* be our personal offering to God. Instead, Christ became that lamb and removed the knife from our hands.

He marked us with his blood, literally and figuratively, and told us to get out of the pews, off our high horses and out into the world to do the work he was sending us to do. Hard work. Smelly work. Dangerous work. Loving work. Fill up at church but hit the road after, taking that of Christ to everyone we encounter in the world.

Like him.

In order to serve we needed to become more like the tax collector...too convicted of his own sin to lift his eyes to God, to feel worthy of God's love. And yet Christ immediately began to show us that we are indeed God's beloved children and that the Father finds us worthy. But we don't get there by being the Pharisee, the thing Jesus disliked and distrusted. We had to become a whole new creature, one the world rarely sees...we had to become the body of Christ in the world.

We are not asked to measure ourselves against others except to see how we can help and what we can give. We are not asked to judge those around us except in what they need and how we can meet those needs. We are not asked to parade our so-called holiness, but to be shadows in the midst of our prayers, whispering them to God's ear alone. We are not asked to expect glory and honor on the earth, but to forsake all expectation of, and desire for, those things so we can more fully give all that we are.

We are asked to be the last into heaven.

Bauer does an amazing job of illustrating the cross...the horizontal and the vertical...the way of dogma and law and self-righteousness, and then the way to the glory of heaven. As Christ followers, we are called to grab onto that vertical beam and pull ourselves up in faith, knowing the reward will be more than we can even imagine. Vertical...from earth to heaven, from sin and death to eternal glory. The horizontal is where we mostly live, wrapped up in our petty arguments and judgments we are not qualified to make, engaged in battles of dogma and position, placing ourselves behind the walls of the churches we build and closing the doors to those we feel don't belong, aren't good enough, don't agree with us. All the while, the Way of the Christ flows by like a stream, simple and quiet. Instead of slamming doors, it swirls around every obstacle, every rock in its way, gradually wearing away resistance with gentle persistence, until there is surrender to the inevitable grace of God. It embraces everything in its path.

We are called to be the stream.

But first we have to be shaped like the rocks in that stream, our edges worn smooth and our resistance worn away. We have to surrender to the flow of God's love, even if it gets a little wild sometimes, allowing it to shape us until we sit comfortably in the Creator's hand.

We are called to be the tax collector, aware of our shortcomings, repentant of our sins, noting our unworthiness and yet striking out in bold belief in the goodness of God.

If we rest on the horizontal crosspiece, it should be only so we can reach down and lift up all who are struggling to find their way up, bringing them higher, holding them steady so they can go on, even if we have to wait a while for our turn. It is stopping to feed the hungry man on the corner, house the homeless family, heal the sick and hurting, clothe those with nothing, pray for those who have lost their faith.

It is nothing less than willing ourselves to be last so others can be first, so we can pour ourselves out as Christ has shown us to do. And the really tricky part is we are called to do it without any acknowledgment from our fellow human beings.

“...We *are* expected, however, to hold selfless love before us as the highest ideal – love, not the law...That love, the shouldering of the burden, is itself the prize; in that love itself is the experience of the kingdom.” (*Stealing Jesus, Bruce Bawer, pg. 38*)

I want to be *that* person.

I want to say the words, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” and feel myself filled with love and grace. But I can only take in as much as I have room for and so I must empty myself in anticipation. I must allow God room to work.

We all should want to be the last into heaven, to know we have given our lives to do the work Christ sent us out to do, to be rewarded by God alone when he calls us “my good and faithful servant,” knowing *he knows*, even if no one else does, and that it’s enough.

Most often, we trap ourselves on that horizontal road, the one that leads out into the world and to human ways and concerns. It’s so hard to grab the vertical and begin to climb, trusting that God will not only lead us, but will help us. As Jesus said, the first will be last and the last will be first. But I am trying to be last because I want to have actually lived the Christ life as fully as I could. I pray for the strength and wisdom to care about hunger over dogma, justice over rules, peace over pain and suffering, fellowship over human judgment.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Let us pray:

“O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your Blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; bring the nations into your fold; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh; and hasten the coming of your kingdom through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

–Book Of Common Prayer, Page 100