

*9He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

The first congregation I served was in a little town in the middle of North Dakota. I remember going to a basketball game at the high school. The team was kind of short – I looked in the program and discovered that the tallest player on the Goodrich varsity was 5’11”. Whenever I was in gatherings in that community I was taller than most everyone else. Now I have never thought of myself as tall – when I played guard on the Milan High School varsity basketball team most games I was guarding someone taller than me. But in Goodrich North Dakota I was tall. When it comes to height it all depends on whom you compare yourself to.

The Lutheran Church in Goodrich was right next to the Baptist church. The Baptists looked down on the Lutherans because Lutherans danced and smoke and drank. The Lutherans liked to talk about the Baptists who were always bragging about their faith but who were glad to join in a game of cards or to share a glass of wine as long as no other Baptists were around to see on them. Each congregation was sure they stood taller than the other. When it came to religion it all depended on whom you compared yourself to.

There was another group in town, folks who did not go to any church but who might be found gathering for coffee in the afternoon, or at the bar late at night. As a local pastor I did not have so much contact with this group but when I did this is the impression I got – they were glad they were not hypocrites like all those church people who thought they were better than everyone else.

One day Jesus told a story to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

Two men went to the temple to pray. One thanked God, the other did not. One lived a life that he thought was pleasing to God, the other did not. If I had to choose between the two of them to teach Sunday School at Christ Lutheran it would not take me a second to decide. I would take the one who thanked God, the one living in a way that he thought was pleasing to God. If I picked the other one parents would be outraged. But Jesus said that the man who had nothing to say but, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” was the one who was right with God that day.

Back in Goodrich, North Dakota was a woman named Pat. Wherever she was her smile lit up the room. When our son, Matt, was born Pat was our favorite choice to watch him for an hour or two – he was always blessed in her presence as were Sue and I – Pat was a beacon of love.

One Sunday morning I was teaching about repentance, about how we are all sinners and need to be like the tax collector in Jesus parable. I wanted all the people in the class to understand that they needed to feel terrible about their sin and to cry out to God, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” But Pat did not get it. She did not feel like a miserable sinner. I remember trying so hard to get her to understand that she was hopelessly caught up in sin but that made no sense to her. Finally she burst out in tears not of repentance but of sorrow that she was not what I demanded that she be.

I do not think that Jesus parable was spoken to Pat. She did not lift herself up by finding a room full of people who were shorter than she was. She was just who she was.

That is what Jesus is asking you and I to be – just who we are, not comparing ourselves to someone else but just coming as we are before God. No words to defend our actions, no bragging, no excuses for failure but coming before God with as much honesty as is possible. Some days for me that means that I come before God with nothing but tears for how I have messed up – how I have lost my temper or walked right by someone I could have helped or how I got defensive when I should have just listened to criticism and learned from it. And some days I come before

God with joy because I did stop to help and it mattered and I feel good about it. And most days I am somewhere in between. But I know that Jesus knows me and that he is not grading on a curve – comparing me to you or you or you. He knows me – he wants me to be honest with him. And to trust that his love comes from his heart – I cannot make him love me more by being good or being humble. I cannot make him love me less by being bad or being proud of myself. But when I think that his love depends on me – it is like I am god – the one in charge – and that is a lie. Jesus love for you is all about who Jesus is – not about who you are or how you compare with someone else. His love is big enough to save everyone. That is all you and I need to know.

So if something is troubling you talk to Jesus about it. And if something is bringing you joy, talk to Jesus about it. And if you want to learn to love others more generously talk to Jesus about it.

He loves you. Amen.