

**Texts: Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22; Psalm 84:1-7; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14**

**Can anyone sitting here this morning honestly say that you have never compared yourself with anyone else here in church? It's easy to fall into that trap this morning.**

**Pharisees get a bad rap in the Gospels. But in Jesus' day and in his culture, they actually tried to live according to the laws of Moses. For centuries, the temple in Jerusalem was the center of faith for the people of Israel. Sacrifice was how people approached God. To make those animal sacrifices required a whole raft of specialized professions – priests, Levites, people who changed Roman money into Temple money, people who sold the animals, people who actually slaughtered and burned the animals. What the Pharisees did was to bring the practices of covenant living into people's homes. They kept the Sabbath by not working. They honored their parents and served their neighbors. They gave generously to those who had less. Nothing in these practices is wrong. They are all intended to bring people closer to God. We all try to do the same thing, right? The Pharisees were on the right side of their faith.**

**Tax collectors, on the other hand, went against their faith. Tax collectors contracted with the Roman empire to pay a certain amount of tribute, or tax, for the district they lived in. But after that, the tax collector was free to collect the money in any way he could, and whatever more money he collected above the tribute due to the Empire, he got to keep. Tax collectors were despised because they collaborated with the Roman overlords and they squeezed their own people to make a profit for themselves.**

**The key to this morning's gospel is how Luke frames the parable that Jesus tells; how he introduces the story: "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves**

**that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Let’s look more closely at the two halves of that sentence.**

**The first part: “Trusted in themselves that they were righteous...” That’s the key. What the Pharisee claimed before God was that he was not like other people. “I fast,” he says. “I tithe. I’m self-sufficient in my faith. I can do this. I am a virtuous man. I can make myself right with God. Thank you, God, for making me who I am.”**

**Notice where the Pharisee is standing as he prays this prayer – by himself. The temple was probably crowded that day. It was probably crowded every day. So to picture this Pharisee standing by himself tells us something about him. He was so sure of his own moral rightness that he didn’t think he needed to be part of the congregation. I imagine that he found a place in the temple where he could put himself front and center before God.**

**Then the second part of Luke’s introduction: “...regarded others with contempt.” The word that is translated as “contempt” has the connotation of worthlessness, not even taking the other person into account. Contempt means to think of someone else as a zero, not even worth mentioning. It’s the zero-sum game once again – my value increases as that other person’s decreases. I can only build myself up if I tear that other person down. There are winners and losers in this journey of life, and if I’m a winner, that that other person is a loser. That’s contempt.**

**I know that no one in this sanctuary has ever even thought this way of anyone else, right? But there’s another insidious phrase that I know gets said because I myself have said it. “There but for the grace of God go I.”**

**On the surface, this statement sounds sympathetic to the other person, compassionate even. But what am I really saying when we say “There but for the grace of**

**God go I”? Do I really mean that God has given me grace but has withheld it from another person? Do I really mean that I feel sorry for someone who doesn’t have as much as I do, or whose life seems to be less fortunate than mine? Or am I really saying “I thank you God that I am not like her”?**

**The tax collector knows that he is the object of contempt. He also stands by himself in the temple, but definitely not front and center. Jesus tells us that he is standing “far off” and I imagine that means he’s over in the back corner, maybe even standing behind a pillar, so that no one will know he’s there. Maybe the tax collector tries to live as devout a life as he can, too. Maybe he also keeps the Sabbath, honors his parents, fasts and tithes 10%. But the difference between him and the Pharisee is that he realizes that he has missed the mark. He realizes that there is something between him and God and that there is nothing that he can do. So his prayer is this: “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus’ audience would have heard that and been appalled. How could someone as vile and despicable as a tax collector deserve any of God’s mercy?**

**But that’s the point. We don’t deserve God’s mercy. None of us. And yet, there it is for the asking. It’s not about who you are. It’s not about what you do. It’s not even about the content of your prayers.**

**The dictionary defines “mercy” as the discretionary power of a judge to pardon someone or to mitigate punishment. To show mercy is to show compassion, kindness, favor. The writer of the Psalms describes God as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Even though what we deserve is God’s wrath, what we receive is God’s mercy. Mercy is who God is. And mercy is there for the asking. Like we do every Sunday at the very beginning of worship. We confess that we have missed the mark, and**

then we ask God to show God's mercy, to forgive us. And every Sunday at the beginning of worship, we hear God's own words of forgiveness and mercy.

What does all this have to do with stewardship? It's this: to know ourselves as stewards is to know that we live in God's mercy. It's to know that whether or not we try to live devout lives, we all miss the mark. And yet, we share in God's mercy and forgiveness. We share in God's divine regard. We don't deserve one bit of it, but God does it anyway. Out of true, steadfast, eternal love.

Little Rio is here this morning, and she's been listening intently to my sermon, I can tell. She has no idea what mercy means. She has no idea who God is. But God knows who Rio is. God has known her since the beginning of her life, and God will know her through to the end. God's mercy is going to touch her this morning and it's going to feel like warm water splashed over her three times and the shape of a cross traced on her head.

I want to teach you a prayer that you can pray at any time. It's called the Jesus prayer. It's a breath prayer which means that you pray it silently as you breathe in and out. It goes like this:

[inhale]      Jesus Christ,

[exhale]      Son of God,

[inhale]      Be merciful to me,

[exhale]      A sinner.

I suggest taking a few minutes every day to breathe this prayer. I suggest that whenever you find yourself tempted to trust in your own ability to live a righteous life, you take a few minutes to breathe this prayer. Or when you find yourself comparing yourself to someone

**else. Or when you realize that you are in need of God's mercy. Because God's mercy is there for the asking.**