

ASH WEDNESDAY

Luke 18:9-14

Go Home Justified

Imagine this scenario. A man walks into a doctor's office, in seemingly good health, but unaware of what appears to be a cancerous tumor behind his ear. "What is the problem," the doctor asks. "Oh, no problem whatsoever," the patient replies. "I am quite healthy. I have big biceps, smooth skin, a healthy head of hair, a strong heart, and so on. I am much healthier than all those gimps in the waiting room. Man, those people need to take charge of their life and live healthier." "Uh, huh," the doctor patiently mumbles. "Doc, did you know I run twice a day, don't eat red meat or drink beer, go to the gym three times a week, have green tea with every meal, and never, and I mean ever, eat donuts?" "Why are you here then?" the doctor interjects. "Well, to tell you how healthy I am and how sick all those people out there are." The doctor would rightly reply, "Well, sir, you are not as healthy as you think, and those sick people already know they are sick, and they will get better before you will, because they have come here to discuss their sickness and not their health."

The most inexcusable sin is the one someone else commits. The most excusable sin is the one to which I am tempted. That is the way our sinful nature reasons, whether we want to admit it or not. Bigger and smaller, prettier and uglier, smarter and dumber, faster and slower, richer and poorer, that is how we measure things. At the gym, the guy to my left is a wimp, because he is in worse shape than me, and the guy on my right needs to get out of the gym and get a life, because he is in better shape than me. We love to compare when we come out on top in the comparison. We love to extol our virtues yet hate to expose our faults. The one who praises us is astute. The one who criticizes doesn't know anything.

Do you know how I can tell when I've not been a very good husband? I have to tell my wife what a good husband I've been. I wouldn't need to tell her if the point was obviously clear, and I wouldn't have to brag on what I had done for her if I had done it out of love and for her benefit alone. Me having to tell my wife what a good husband I am turns whatever I have done into corporate charity, you know, where a business does something nice in a way that everyone is sure to notice their logo; it turns whatever I have done into presidential kisses on baby's cheeks, perfectly planted for the cameras to catch.

Humility is perhaps the hardest virtue to cultivate because it is not something we do; it is the awareness of what we have not done. It is not something we produce; it is the awareness of what we lack. You can't decide to be humble; something has to humble you. Humility isn't something we can be proud of; humility is the absence of pride. Humility is not inserting some pious-sounding disclaimer before you brag; it is the knowledge that you have nothing braggable about you. Humble is not something you can be more of than someone else; it is the realization that there is not more, but only less involved in humility. Humility is, having done all that is commanded of you, still knowing full well that you must confess at the end of the day, "*We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty*" (Luke 17:9).

We sing with David in Psalm 51, "*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*" I think it is interesting that David says these are "*the sacrifices of God.*" If you were more pious and insightful like me, you would find it interesting too. What does he mean by "*the sacrifices of God?*" These are the sacrifices that God accepts because He gives them. While your children or spouse might not be pleased to receive a broken present, broken presents are the only ones God wants.

Two men went up to the temple to pray today, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Both the world and God saw a righteous man and a sinner. There was agreement on that. There was disagreement, however, about who was which. The Pharisee, to human eyes, was clearly the righteous man. He kept the law better than anyone else. He was a good guy, so to speak. He was a role model. The tax collector was, on the contrary, everything the Pharisee was not. He was the sinner. Even he admitted that. But never count a Lutheran out.

Lutherans can always spot Lutherans, and I don't know if this tax collector was a Schultz or a Schroeder or a Schwartz, but he was most definitely Lutheran. While you can expect to find a Lutheran in the front of the line for the potluck, everyone knows where to find a Lutheran in church: the back pew, with eyes down, probably on the hymnal. A Lutheran might not remember the color of your eyes after the service, but a Lutheran will remember the color of your shoes. But the real dead giveaway of the tax collector's Lutheranism is this: when they come into God's house, Lutherans, even the cutest little most innocent looking children—oh, their self-esteem—always say the exact same thing: *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* And that is all God wants to hear, because those words tell Him you are broken and you want to be fixed, that you know you can't fix yourself.

The sinful flesh is good at saying sorry. It's just not good at meaning it. The sinful flesh is good at saying sorry, but it likes its apologies with big buts. Honey, I am sorry I did that, but you know... God, I know I shouldn't have done that, but this or that... But God doesn't want our buts. He wants our broken and contrite hearts. He doesn't want us to dress up our shame; He wants us to strip it of excuses and expose it. God already knows who you are; He just wants you to know as well. He wants you to go to the Doctor, not to report another's symptoms, but your own.

If Jesus had come with the Pharisee's righteousness and not with God's, not a soul would have been saved. The Pharisee's righteousness was a manufactured righteousness that was good in comparison to other righteousness, but not complete, not impeccable. The Pharisee's righteousness was a righteousness we could have attained for ourselves with a little elbow grease, if we just picked ourselves up by our bootstraps. But we don't need the Pharisee's righteousness to be saved. We need God's righteousness. If the Pharisee's righteousness were enough, there would be no Lent in the Church Year. Jesus could simply have come and told us to watch Dr. Phil. But there is Lent, and the Pharisee's righteousness is useful only as eye candy to hang on the devil's refrigerator.

God's righteousness is not something we earn; it is something God gives. Our merit does not move God to give it. Our prayers do not move God to give it. Nothing we do or have moves God to give it. Rather, it is just the opposite. Our need moves God to give it, to place it into our broken, desperate, hopeless hands. That is why the Pharisee was the sinner and the tax collector the saint. That is why after you told God what you are at the beginning of the service—a sinner—God told you what He has declared you to be instead—a saint. And that sinner and that saint will wrestle within you all the way to the grave, and the only thing that can drown the pride of the flesh is the humility that springs from your Baptism, where you did nothing but get wet with God's mercy.

You began your Lenten journey today when many of you passed through the doors to His house and sat as close to them as you could, not to get out first, since the back pew gets the usher's nod last, but because you knew who you are, or at least now you know who you are: the tax collector with the broken and contrite heart. Those of you in the front pews, don't worry, the back pew isn't so much a pew as a state of mind. There's always room in the metaphorical back pew. Lent is a time for self-examination, for repentance, and, most importantly, for forgiveness, because Lent takes us to the cross, where Christ won for us for all eternity what He gave to us today in the Absolution and will give to us today in the Sacrament: a new identity, not necessarily in human eyes, but in His eyes, which are the eyes that matter most. By Christ's death and resurrection, by the Father's mercy and grace, you leave God's house today the same way you came in, or at least should have come in: like the tax collector. You leave justified, for when you tell the Doctor your symptoms, He is ready and willing to cure your disease. Here's the cure [pointing to the processional crucifix next to pulpit]. There's your medicine [pointing to the altar]. Amen.