

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1 Corinthians 15:1-10, Luke 18:9-14

*“And his grace toward me was not in vain.”*

Two men, one who never lied and one who always lied, while traveling stumbled upon a land of apes. One of the apes, who'd made himself king, had them brought before him and arranged his court like that of human royalty to impress them, commanding them to tell him what they thought of him and his kingdom.

The man who always lied spoke first, “You seem a most mighty king.”

“And what of these around me?” the king asked.

“They are worthy companions for yourself,” the liar said, fit to be at least ambassadors and leaders of armies.”

The ape was thrilled with the lie and gave the liar a handsome gift.

The man who never lied thought to himself, “If a lie fetches such a great reward, surely I will get a great present for telling the truth.”

The ape then asked the man who never lied the same question, what he thought of him and his court.

“You are,” the honest man said, “a most excellent ape, and these around you are excellent apes too.

The king of the apes was incensed with anger and handed him over to his fellow apes to be bitten and clawed to death. (*Aesop's Fables*, #44, paraphrased)

We don't like to hear the truth, do we? Sure, when we hear the Holy Gospel today, we frown upon the Pharisee, because that's what good Christians do, frown upon Pharisees, but are we really all that different from him? Don't you feel at least a little pride in not being the Pharisee? Aren't we at least a little pleased with ourselves that we're not so self-righteous as he was? Why couldn't he have been more like us, we might even think?

We don't like to hear the truth, do we? Sure, we don't want to be the Pharisee in this parable, but are we really ready and willing to be the tax collector. When confronted with our sin by a brother or sister in Christ, by our pastor, or by our own conscience, is our first inclination to protest, “Are you saying that *I'm* sinning?” as if that were an unthinkable thing. Jesus' point is clear today: unless we see ourselves in the tax collector, and not only see ourselves in him, but adopt his same humble attitude before the Lord, we are not yet ready to fully grasp the forgiveness he received.

One of the most tiring aspects of the Ministry for me is excuses. I get them in most every form, for most every purpose, and most every day. Sometimes I even make them. And they just drag me down, because they are nothing but the Pharisee in us, an attempt to deal with God on the basis of our own works, self-servingly portrayed of course, rather than to own up to one's sin and be done with it. And people may indeed fool me with excuses, if that is they're goal, though I'm harder to fool than you might think, but they won't fool God, and in the end their not hurting me but themselves, just as when they lie to their doctor they're not hurting their doctor but themselves. God wants to forgive. Excuses rob him of the opportunity, because excuses don't confess sin; they deny it.

I think sometimes the St. titles in front of the Apostles' names and the names of other important Christians of ages past confuse us. I think that title can become something we strive after, a good report card of sorts, an All-Star appearance in God's grand softball game in the sky, the ability to stand out among and above our brothers and sisters in the Faith. I mean, wouldn't it be great to be St. Wade, or St. Whoever-You-Are? It sure would be better than being Sinner So-And-So, wouldn't it?

Here's what St. Paul has to say about all that in our second lesson:

*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*

The saints, that is, those who've been given the formal title "St.," were in truth spectacular sinners. They were the perfect preachers of God's grace, precisely because they deeply understood it, had desperately needed it, because they were persecutors of the Church (St. Paul), deniers of Christ (St. Peter), adulterers (David), murderers (Moses), tax-collectors (St. Matthew) and the like. They were spectacular sinners who had been humbled by the law of God and put on the tax collector's sandals, and only in that way did they even begin to walk in the works God had prepared in advance for them to walk in.

"You are," the truthful man said, "a most excellent ape, and your companions are excellent apes too." No, you're not apes, but you do well to ape St. Paul's honest self-evaluation and forthright repentance, and you do well to see in Jesus' parable not only a Pharisee to be better than but a tax-collector to identify with and imitate.

The tax collector came to God's house, the temple, to pray. That's where sinners go to find mercy, because that's where God's gifts are, His Word and Sacraments. The tax-collector walked into God's presence (like a good Lutheran, staying in the back, of course) and admitted right away that He deserved no place there (and he didn't), yet begged God to declare him a welcome guest (which he was). And God did not fail him. He, Jesus says, went home justified, that is, declared righteous and innocent in God's sight for Christ's sake. In other words, when the Father looked at the tax collector, He saw His own beloved Son, and that, in fact, is what the tax-collector had become: God's own beloved son. And that's what these gatherings of ours are about, and when we realize that, and when we from the heart seek what God first and foremost wants to give us here, everything changes. There was no show that day in the temple, no stage or smoke or one-liners, but there was what the tax collector needed most: new birth.

Listen again to what St. Paul has to say in our second lesson: "*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*" Hear it again: "*And his grace toward me was not in vain.*" In other words, God's grace not only made St. Paul something, a saint, as all who repent and believe are saints, but it did something to St. Paul: it drove him to work all the more, not for salvation, but for the Savior.

We were reminded last week as the Lord lamented Jerusalem's looming destruction that there is little more dangerous than to hear God's Word and then go on like nothing happened, without improving our life or purposefully continuing in the very same sin we were committing before. The punishment for the one who consistently hears and ignores will be greater than for the one who did not receive such thorough instruction. God's grace is not idle. Grace embraced is not grace without effect. Like God's Word that delivers it, it is a living and active thing, and it drove St. Paul to work harder than all of the other Apostles, not to earn God's grace, but because the undeserved grace of God was indeed in him, and it ought to drive us to a more committed life in Christ as well.

"*Two men went up into the temple to pray.*" Be the tax-collector. Don't beat around the bush with God. Our God sets bushes aburning. Just ask Moses. No, man up and beat your breast and pray, "*God be merciful to me, a sinner.*" And your prayer will not fall on deaf ears. You will go home justified.

An ape is an ape. A sinner is a sinner. But for those who take God's words to heart, that unpleasant news that you are a sinner precedes the most beautiful words of all, that you are a saint, a sinner whose sins have been paid for on the cross, whose eyes have been lifted from the guilt of shame to the glory of the resurrection. My friends, God is merciful. You are forgiven. You are a saint. And God's grace is not in vain. Be a saint. Amen.