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Jeremiah 14: 7 – 10, 19 - 22
 2 Timothy 4: 6 - 8, 16 – 18

Psalm 84: 1 – 7
 Luke 18: 9 – 14

Simul justus et peccator. This Latin phrase was perhaps one of Martin Luther's most famous lines. It means that we are 'both justified and sinner at the same time.' And today's parable from Luke points us back to this theology about ourselves.

In today's Gospel, we have two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector. Let's look at the Pharisee first. We tend to perceive Pharisees as the bad guys. They seem to be always challenging Jesus, or Jesus is telling them that they haven't got it right. It appears to be a mutually contentious relationship. But not completely, at least as far as the Gospel of Luke is concerned. On several occasions, Pharisees invite Jesus to dine with them. Because table fellowship is so important – who you sit down to eat with matters – this seems like a good thing. At first. But each of the times, the Pharisee ends up criticizing Jesus for not washing up properly, or for letting 'one of those kind' of women massage his feet with ointment, or for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus ends up calling them fools, money lovers, adulterers, and hypocrites. We find Jesus saying, "Woe to you, Pharisees!" Not a way to win friends and influence people. But then in Ch. 13, some of the Pharisees want to save Jesus, so they warn him about Herod's plan to kill him. [John's Gospel – Nicodemus is a Pharisee.] So maybe, as with any group of people, some of them are in Jesus' corner and some are not.

In Jesus' world, though, most people consider the Pharisees to be role models. Their job, as the people of Israel see it, is to keep the faith alive, holding on to the traditions, even in the midst of the Roman oppressors and occupiers. The way that the Pharisees do that is by holding tightly to the laws that help the people maintain their holiness, their special relationship with God. Pharisees are the elders, the wardens, the good stewards who do the work of the Temple and provide financial support as necessary to widows and orphans. Pharisees are almost single-mindedly devoted to God, and for the most part, their sinfulness arises out of their desire to overachieve. Pharisees are the professional clergy, the ones who have the time and ability to keep all 613 laws of ritual purity, when the people as a whole do not. The issue that Jesus most often has with them is that their zeal is for the *law* and not for the *intent* of the law. As Raymond Bailey writes, for the Pharisees, religion has become the ends rather than the means.

So here is this one Pharisee, standing right up near the front of the Temple for all to see. As a community leader, he is perhaps robed in the equivalent of a Brooks Brothers' suit [Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton]. He adjusts his prayer stole of white and blue stripes with long fringes and stands up a little straighter as he begins to pray. Out of the corner of his eye, he is horrified to see a known tax collector on the far side of the Temple. Tax collectors are not allowed in the Temple. The disdain on the Pharisee's face is obvious. Closing his eyes to this sight, the Pharisee raises his face and his arms heavenward and begins to pray, "O God, thank you for making me such a leading citizen for the benefit of all these people! I do more than you ask – I tithe on my gross income, not my net. I fast twice a week, instead of just once like the slacker Pharisees. Oh, and thank you even more that I am not like that low-life tax collector over there. Sincerely, me. Amen."

Meanwhile, far across the stone pavement of the Temple, the tax collector kneels on the hard floor, eyes cast downward, fists beating against his chest in acknowledgement of his guilt before God. Now tax collectors have never been popular people. And it is perhaps even more that way with

the tax collectors in Judea. Jesus' contemporaries hate tax collectors. They are the lowest of the low. Because they collect the taxes demanded by Rome, they are traitors. And because they make their living off of how much they can get away with adding to the tax bill for people, they are considered crooks and cheats. Therefore, tax collectors are both collaborators and ritually unclean. They are detested socially, politically, economically and spiritually.

So why is the tax collector even in the Temple? Has he suddenly had an awakening to his evil role in both his own actions of coercion and cheating and his actions as part of a systemically abusive government? Perhaps he has realized just how far away from Yahweh, God, he has gotten and feels a pull to return. There's no telling, but it must be pretty strong to push him into the Temple where he is persona non grata. Even though we don't actually hear that he is willing to give back the money he has stolen, perhaps he is there to make a heartfelt confession of his greed.

Psalm 84 that we read today is a pilgrimage psalm. It's a psalm sung by people who want to draw closer to God. In verse 5, in the translation we have in the Prayer Book, we read "those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs." In various other translations, rather than 'the desolate valley,' it reads 'the balsam valley' or the 'valley of baca.' Apparently, 'baca' is an obscure Hebrew word that means 'weeper.' So it would be 'the valley of the weeper.' A very sad, desiccated, barren place. A place of separation and isolation from other people and from God and even, as the Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton notes, from one's better self. A place to grieve and to cry tears of repentance and remorse.

The tax collector would seem to be in his own private valley of baca as he beats his chest and dares not even raise his face and his eyes. We don't know exactly what has pricked his conscience to bring him to this point, but here he is, praying simply for God's mercy on his sinfulness.

The end. This is where Jesus' parable ends and his commentary begins. He shocks everyone around him by saying that it is the tax collector who is justified rather than the one perceived to be head and shoulders more holy, more 'religiously worthy.' In our common, everyday language, we use 'justified' in the sense that something is ours by right or that we are in the right with something we have done. "I was justified in firing that person." But in scripture, 'justified' is used differently. It's used in passive voice, that is, people are justified by God. They are made righteous, simply out of God's grace, whether or not the world would say that that person 'deserves' it. To be made righteous is to be in a good, whole, unbroken relationship with God. The psalm says that those who go through the desolate valley, the valley of the weeper, will find it a place of springs – a place of renewal and rejuvenation, a place of cleansing. So the tax collector has come through that valley of tears, of sorrow and contrition and found himself washed in the pools of God's grace and mercy and love. His God-filled prayer has turned his heart Godward.

The Pharisee on the other hand, goes home just as arrogant and separated from God as when he arrived. His prayer, filled with himself, gives God no room to inhabit his heart. The Pharisee hasn't left God any room to do anything but agree with his self-assessment.

If we are to find ourselves in this story, who are we – the Pharisee or the Publican, the tax collector? Are we a sinner or a saint? Yes. Simul justus et peccator. We are simultaneously justified and yet a sinner. It's a both/and. We all have a little bit of Pharisee in us. I wonder how many of us, on hearing the end of the Gospel reading, at least subconsciously said to ourselves, "Well, at least I'm not as bad as that Pharisee!" We want to think that we are decent folk who appreciate others and want to

do what's right. And most of the time we are. But not always. It's perhaps part of human nature that everyone, or every group of people, has someone that they look down on and think they're better than. At least I can drive better than that yahoo! At least I didn't get the bottom grade in the class. At least I... fill in the blank. If we were perfect, we wouldn't need Jesus in the first place.

But sometimes, we are also the tax collector. Sometimes, we are the ones who have gone through that desolate, dry valley of sorrow and remorse, of tears and self-recriminations. Sometimes, we are the ones whose hearts have awoken to the things we have done to separate ourselves from neighbor, from God and even from ourselves. At some point in our lives, and perhaps many times, we are each in that place of darkness that we are not too eager to explore, but which begs for the Light of the world to enter in.

That's where our pilgrimage with Jesus, the Way of the Cross, leads – through those places where we can come to terms with the fact that we are (just like everyone else) both sinners in dire need of forgiveness, and saints, already living in the glory of God's grace and mercy. We are pilgrims on the way. A way which offers us cleansing and refreshment, that begins and ends in prayer to a God who is always calling us home. +