

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge – Oct. 27, 2019

Pentecost 20

Luke 18: 9 – 14

Have you ever been desperate? I mean, really desperate? Have you ever felt like you were backed into a corner with no room to breathe, much less to move? It's that place where high anxiety turns into full-on panic. And what can make it even worse is the realization that you're suffocating because of something you did or failed to do. It's not just circumstances that put you in this desperate fix, it's your own fault. And the walls keep closing in.

Have you ever been there? I have. And I'll tell you about it in a minute. But first let me tell you how I got to thinking about the experience of desperation and panic. I've been sitting with Jesus' parable that we just read for the last few days. We usually think about this parable in really binary terms. We're so conditioned to hearing about Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees that we reflexively put the black hat on the self-righteous Pharisee in this story which means the white hat needs to go on the repentant tax collector. We commend the tax collector and we condemn the Pharisee. Pretty neat and tidy, isn't it? Except when we do it that way we're just as self-righteous as the self-righteous Pharisees. And where does that get us?

Now Jesus' audience wouldn't have had the same take on this story. For 1st century Jesus, Pharisees were admired. They were interpreters and guardians of the Law and most of them sought, very sincerely, to live out the Law in their lives. They tried very hard to be righteous, to be good people. And the people commended them for it.

The tax collector, now that's a different story. Tax collectors were agents of the occupying Romans. The Evil Empire. They were traitors to their nation. And even worse, they profited off their bad behavior. The Roman taxes were really onerous and the tax collectors add to the

misery by putting their own fees on top of the already heavy taxes. This guy wouldn't have been welcome in most places.

So let's see these two polar opposite figures as Jesus' audience would have. The Pharisee begins his prayer by checking off all the right boxes. He isn't a thief. He isn't a rogue. He isn't an adulterer. He fasts twice a week and tithes a tenth of his income. And for God's sake, he's not a traitor to his nation like that guy over there. No, he's a good man who's working hard, and sincerely, to follow the law.

The tax collector – well, the tax collector. The chickens have come home to roost. The walls are closing in on him. He can barely breathe. Anxiety has turned to full – on panic. He knows that he's **not** a good and righteous man. He hasn't followed the law. He's hated and despised by all his countrymen. And it's his fault. He's made some terrible choices. And his guilt and remorse and shame are crushing him.

So he comes to the only place he knows where he might find help for his desperate condition. The Temple. He comes to the Temple and throws himself on God's mercy. Crying out to Heaven. "I've done wrong. I'm weak. I'm guilty. I'm desperate. Help me, Lord. Have mercy on me, a sinner."

I told you a little while ago that I've had my own moments of desperation. I actually hadn't thought about this in quite a while until this week. Nothing so dramatic as the tax collector in the Temple. A small thing, really, but a moment where I was truly desperate never the less. I was a young lawyer and had a big case I was preparing for trial. I was the lead. No one looking over my shoulder. Now, before a trial there are always all sorts of deadlines that have to be met. And if these deadlines aren't met there can be some pretty significant consequences. Here's where it got tricky.

I had procrastinated a little bit – actually a lot – in getting to this file, and when I finally sat down to begin my pre trial preparation in earnest, I quickly began to realize that I might have blown some pretty significant deadlines. And if I had blown those deadlines, the

consequences could be bad. Really bad. And so my high level of anxiety began to turn into full – on panic. I couldn't breathe. The walls were closing in. I was desperate. As I sat in my office that morning, I recall the feeling of having no where to turn. Except to Heaven. And so I did. Now, I'm actually pretty pleased that I didn't bargain with God. You know, "Lord, get me out of this jam, and I promise I'll go to church every Sunday for the next 10 years." Thankfully I didn't do that. What I did was simply sit still and ask for mercy in the midst of my guilt and shame and desperation. Have mercy on me Lord, a sinner.

So, by and by, the panic subsided and I had the presence of mind to ask one of my older partners to take a look at the file with me and he did and we figured out some work-arounds and in the end all was well. Not much of a story, really, except the feeling of desperation and crying out for God's mercy came right back home to me as I sat with the tax collector's dilemma the other day. Believe me, I was pretty darn careful to follow the rules after that kind of near death experience.

So, back to our story you see how Jesus flips the script here? It is not the dutiful, the righteous, the well behaved Pharisee who is justified. It's the one who admits he isn't dutiful and righteous and well behaved and who pleads for God's mercy, that his life might be changed, who goes home right with God. Jesus' audience must have been astonished. And here's another astonishing take away from this parable. There is learning and insight and transformation for both of these men. For the tax collector, having received God's mercy, he will become more like the righteous Pharisee, a follower of the Law, the Law which, after all, was given to the people by God. He will try to do good. And the Pharisee can become more like the humble tax collector. He can recognize that simply checking off all boxes isn't good enough. He can follow every jot and tittle of the law, but if his heart isn't humbled, if he doesn't recognize his need for God's mercy and grace, all his rule following won't amount to anything. They can learn from each other.

They can teach each other. They need each other. And where does this all happen? In the Temple. Which is to say, in community.

I don't know about you, but there are times when I'm the Pharisee, the dutiful rule follower, trying to do it all on my own. And then there are times, no doubt fewer, when I'm acutely aware of my brokenness, my need for God's mercy and grace. And thanks be to God, I have a community where all these parts of myself can be held and transformed. That's why I need this community. I need to be in a place where God's love is being witnessed to and acted out every single day. I need to be in a community where I can know God's mercy and grace in spite of my brokenness and my failings.

We need each other, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ. We need each other as surely as the Pharisee and the tax collector need each other. And we need to be here together in this place, in this community, where the love and the grace and the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ can be at work in each of our lives.

Do we need to pay the light bill and the water bill at St. Thomas? Yes. Do we need to maintain these beautiful buildings and grounds? Sure. Do we need to pay our staff an appropriate living wage commensurate with their abilities and their dedication to their ministries here? I think so. All that's important. But here's something even more important. I'm giving to this community because I need this place. I need to be here with you knowing and sharing Jesus' love and mercy. I need that like I need sunshine. And if you're here today, my guess is that you know you need this place too. We need each other. We need this community.

So when you're completing your pledge card, let it reflect your gratitude for God drawing you here to this blessed place. Let your pledge card reflect your gratitude for calling you into a community where you can be yourself, a person who is trying to do good, who wants to do good and a person who also knows your need for mercy.

Let your pledge be an offering of thanks to God for all the blessings and all the challenges of this life.

Amen

