

Pentecost 23, Year C, Proper 25  
10-27-13  
All Saints Episcopal Church

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.

Have you ever looked in the back of the Prayer Book? Way in the back. All the way back to page 845 and following. There's a section there called An Outline of the Faith - commonly called the Catechism. It is an outline for instruction. In the earliest time of Christianity, those who came to receive instruction in order to become Christians were called catechists. Hence, Catechism. (Or the other way around - I never took Latin.)

The Catechism is not intended to be a complete statement of belief and practice, but it is intended to be a point of departure for the teacher and the students in the class. It is broken down into a series of questions and answers. (In the 'old' days, some of us were required to memorize parts of it.)

The first set of questions and answers in the Catechism is about human nature. What are we by nature? What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Why then do we live apart from God and out of harmony with creation? And what help is there for us?

When we drill down from the very wide, very general, to the more specific, the result is the fundamental question: Who Am I?

I am created in the image of God. I am different from anybody else. I am free to make choices. Sometimes I make bad choices, but God still loves me anyway. I am called to live in harmony with creation and with God. God has created all the people

I live in community with because God creates everyone. It is important for me to be in relationship with others.

In fact, it is impossible to find out who we are if we are NOT in relationship with others. We are who we are made to be, but we can only find out who we are and grow in that knowledge by knowing who others are, by being intentional about how we relate to them and by being attentive to how they relate to us.

When the Book of Common Prayer was revised in 1979, one of the completely new parts in the book was the addition of the Baptismal Covenant. It reflected the change in the theology of baptism from the renunciation of 'the world, the flesh and the devil' to the idea of baptism happening within community, in which we promise to love our neighbors, to treat everyone with dignity and respect, and to strive for justice and peace among all people.

Baptism and the Eucharist are the 2 main ways in which we come together regularly in this community, to celebrate and give thanks for God's gifts to us. These sacraments help us to know what the kingdom of God looks like - like being raised to a new life of service in Christ - like a meal to which all are invited, in which all eat and are satisfied, in which all are filled with God's abundance, and in which - at the end - all are dismissed into the world to serve God in community.

One of the reasons why people are attracted to the Episcopal Church is because of our liturgy - its beauty -- in word, in sound, in smell, in taste and in sight. Engaging all our senses when we worship helps us to know God more fully, and to know ourselves more fully in relationship with God. But if we are not also aware of our relationships with others, and our responsibilities to each other as part of the community, then what happens here on Sunday becomes only a show.

If you have ever participated in Food Share or IHN/Family Promise or Special Ministries Camp, you know that coming face to face with others in our community who live on the margins is an experience that opens our eyes to a new way to see

and think about what it means to be in community - who is the community, who am I in the community and what responsibility do I have in it. For anyone who has not participated in any of these activities or something similar, I encourage you to do so. After that experience, chances are great that being here on Sunday will change for you and all the rest of us!

But by now I am sure you are wondering, what could all this possibly have to do with our Gospel lesson for today? Well, just about everything. Because, you see, the Pharisee, whom we love to dislike, to point fingers at, to put down - was not really a bad guy! He did all the right things a good Hebrew was supposed to do. He went to temple regularly. He gave a tenth not only of his money, but a tenth of all that he had. He fasted. He prayed. He was a real stand-up guy.

His problem, though, was that he thought he could do it all on his own. He came to give his end-of-the-month report to God, not to ask for anything from God, much less to thank God for what has been given to him by God. He thought he was better off than others because of the good things he did, and did not need anyone else. Instead, he was cut off from God and from his neighbors, and didn't even know it. His time in the Temple was a show.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knew that he could not do it on his own. He knew that he did not do everything he was supposed to do. In his job as a tax collector, he took money from his own people and turned it over to the oppressive government that kept his people poor, that kept them under its thumb, that kept them marginalized. To make matters worse, he charged them more than the government required for the taxes so that he could make a living himself!

The tax collector knew he needed God's help, God's love. So he came to the Temple, open to receive God's grace and love. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," he cried. And because God is always saying 'yes' to that request, the tax collector received that grace and that love. He was not cut off from God.

The community of faith also makes God's love known to one another. We have promised to love God and our neighbor. We have promised to treat our neighbor with dignity and respect. We have committed ourselves to welcome both the Pharisee and the tax collector in our midst, not to cut them off. We have committed ourselves to strive for justice and peace among all people, even Pharisees, even tax collectors.

Then may we, like the Pharisee, do what God calls us to do. And may we, like the tax collector, knowing that all of us are broken, ask God to be merciful to us, too. May we come to know more fully who we are and whose we are. May we know God's love through God's eternal 'yes.' And may we bear that love as the community of faith, both within these walls and as we go forth in the name of Christ. AMEN.