

Sermon Text: Luke 18:9-14

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

You've just heard the Gospel reading, and don't we love to hate that Pharisee! Wait a minute! How did that Pharisee get to be so Pharisical? In direct to opposition to the lesson Jesus is teaching, we judge him so quickly and so smugly, and we move on to identify with the properly penitent robber and extortioner tax collector. We may wonder is there not some third option, but there isn't. Again I wonder how did the Pharisee get to be so Pharisical and did his synagogue have anything to do with it? You may know that the priest ran the sacred temple, but the Pharisees ran the local synagogues. They were the local pastors. They were the rabbis, the teachers, the preachers, who lived among the people in the midst of the community.

I imagine that religious communities were much the same then as now, and I know that sometimes congregations can push ministers into the role of a Pharisee. They want the ministers to be good on their behalf. They want the ministers to be publicly prim and proper on their behalf. They want the ministers to be more of an icon and a symbol and less, less flesh and blood. I imagine there was tremendous pressure in the Pharisees day as there sometimes is now to conform to that pressure to become that symbol, a sort of living icon, and no longer an actual man. The pressure of watching what you say always, of being watched always, following the rules of religion, as you understand them, and as you understand your people understand them! All the time! All the time! I have sympathy for the Pharisees. It is exhausting to begin living for God, and to end up living out all the varying and variable expectations that every member has on any given day. You may not be able to imagine that pressure, but trust me, I can.

I can understand how a Pharisee could become a living symbol of all his community's expectations and live not as a man, but as an echo of all they've expected in a religious leader. You know what is left out of that equation? God, God is left out. The religious system whether then or now can become what we play to and what we live for. The system can twist you into something paper thin and more concerned with appearances and externals and trivialities than with the living God. I can see how the Pharisee became the Pharisee. That is what his people wanted him to be.

I'm sure it happened then, and it sometimes happens now. Synagogue or church can become a system of religion that has nothing to do with the heart and nothing to do with God and everything to do with the expectations of the audience! You watch your P's and Q's. You comb your hair. You polish your shoes. You scrub your face. You wear nice clothes. You play a role, and your role your church has written for you. As long as you do that, all seems well, but it is not really well because God is left out of it.

There is one rule for all Pharisical synagogues and churches, and the rule is you must never, ever be real in church! You can talk about far-off events and things that don't

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, October 28, 2007

touch us, and we couldn't touch if we wanted to, and that's okay. You can talk about other people nearby, but other people who aren't here, but never the real problems of your own people. That rule drives some ministers over the line into Pharisaism. That rule that no matter what, minister, don't you be real because then we may have to see you as a human, and if we have to see our leader as a human with flaws, then we might have to look at our own flaws. If our leader, whether minister or rabbi, our holy man has flaws, then how much worse might our flaws be, and so the synagogue says, rabbi, we don't even want to think about our flaws so don't you dare reveal any cracks in your armor. No, let's get for ourselves someone who is good on our behalf, someone who is holy on our behalf, someone who reads the Scripture on our behalf, and does the rituals properly on our behalf so we can lay that job on him, and not really worry so much about God and ourselves. So they did.

The Pharisee of this story fought it, and he became what he became, not human any more, but a symbolic holy man on behalf of others so that they would not have to. Yes, I can understand how the Pharisee got to be the so Pharisaical.

Once years ago, I was dating a young girl in high school, and I attended her church from time to time with her family. I can still see this church from I-26 as I go to Spartanburg. It's almost within sight of 26. Every time I see it, it reminds me of what happened at that church one fine Sunday morning. It was in the very middle of worship, and a deacon stood up, and he accused the minister of having an inappropriate relationship with the choir director. I remember sitting in that congregation feeling shocked and uncomfortable. I also remember the look of abject horror and confusion on the face of the minister, who was just about to preach. The same look was on the choir director's face. I saw no anger. I saw no guilt. I saw shock and horror, and I was at the time about 16, and you know if you've ever tried to fake sincerity or fake compassion or fake understanding about the feelings of a teenager, you know you can't get by with that. Teenagers have a special sense of when an adult is being sincere or not, and they will call you on it. Teenagers are looking for hypocrisy everywhere! All the time! Because I think they are looking for whom to trust. Well, with my teenage hypocrisy radar out that day, I was looking closely, and I judged in my heart that they seemed innocent. They didn't look terrified. They didn't look fearful. They looked shocked and stunned and innocent to me. When I saw the minister and I saw the director and saw them standing there, standing still in front of the whole church at the worship service they had turned into a witch hunt and a trial, I looked around, and it seemed that many there had been expecting this! I looked around, and many of the folks seemed pleased with what was going on. Then something happened. Something that when I think about it, I almost choke up. I almost cried. The spell of that moment was broken by the older brother of the girl whom I was dating. His name was Marty, and Marty was a friend and a teammate of mine. We were the same age. I respected to this day what he did. Marty stood up in the midst of all the smug folks, who knew that accusation was coming. Marty stood up, and he lost it! I mean he just lost it! He said, “You people just want to play church, and this is not a real church! You people just want to play church, and now you want to play kill the minister, and I'm not playing!” He left. He just got up and left.

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Well, I was scheduled to eat lunch with this same family later that day, and I didn't know what to do. I started rationalizing. This is not my church. This is not my business. This does seem wrong. I'm leaving, too. I got up, and I left. I said, "I'm sorry, but I will see y'all later." When I got to their house for lunch later, and I saw on the adults' faces odd smiles of satisfaction – that seemed wrong, too. I will never forget the precise words the father asked me. He said, "Why did you leave? It was just getting to be fun!" That's a quote.

Isn't it fun to be on the good side, and judge others as less than? Isn't it fun to play church as opposed to be honest and struggle, the struggle of faith? The local rabbis and the local synagogues no doubt were also targets of such fun. So goes the pressure of playing the distant proper Pharisee then and now. Real is not encouraged, and it might get you moved!

That story from my life makes me think of this passage of Scripture. It also reminds me of the tremendous respect I had for Marty, who stood up and said, "Y'all are just playing church, and now you're playing kill the minister, and I'm not playing!" I felt the wrongness of what was going on in my belly, but he had the guts to stand up and say it. How did the Pharisee get to be the Pharisee? By playing the part and ignoring his heart. He got to be that way by playing the part that was written for him, but not paying attention to his heart.

You know, you've all heard the legend of when the Spartan warriors converted to Christianity. They were baptized in the pool. They went all the way under except for their sword hand. They kept it up out of the water. Their sword hand was unbaptized and still fresh for killing. Now, we Methodists when we baptize, we start at the top! I guess we baptize the brains. We are taught to say, yes, I believe, but our hearts, I sometimes wonder. We don't even live up to our own standards much less God's standards of love and compassion for others. We don't even live up to what we think is right and just and true. I suppose that makes us all hypocrites, doesn't it?

It's when our hearts are baptized and warmed and made into flesh that feels instead of stone, then we can feel the pain of another. Then we can feel the hurt of another. We feel for those who hurt themselves through bad judgment instead of judging them. We feel for those who hurt themselves through covenant breaking, through body abusing, and through plain old lying. We know how it happens because it has happened to us. It happens by one little step at a time. We wander off our own standards, much less God's path. We know because we've been there. We get lost under our own power, one little choice at a time.

I wonder if we, like the Spartans, have baptized our brains, but left our hearts stony and cold. The Pharisee pretended that he had never been off the path, that he kept all the rules, at least he did keep the little bitty rules, but the big ones having to do with the heart and how you treat other people and whether you have any compassion or just treat faith as some sort of game, the big rules he ignored. He echoed the spoken standards of his

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community, and he lived them out under the spotlights so his people could feel vicariously holy through him.

Now, the tax collector. How did he get to be the tax collector? His heart apparently had been changed. It was not unfeeling stone. He did not live only with his brain. He felt the pain of betraying his country. He felt the pain of betraying and cheating others, living off extorted money, extorted with the power of the invading enemy Rome behind him. He took what Rome wanted and more and more and enriched himself off the pain and the impoverishment of his neighbors, his former friends and family! The money did him no good. The money did him no good. It gave him no happiness. The money gave him nothing he'd thought it would, but because his heart was being softened to feel for others and to feel guilt for his actions, the money did give him pain. It was stolen, extorted, ill gotten gain. He had not earned it, but taken it by force from people who could not resist. He was far off, far back in the corner, not even daring to look up at Heaven, seeing himself as not much more than the dust from which we come up. The tax collector said, Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.

Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. That is a famous medieval prayer called “The Jesus Prayer,” which comes from this passage, Lord, recognizing who the Lord is, Jesus Christ, recognizing Jesus as the Savior, have mercy on me. I trust in God's mercy. I am a sinner. Lord, I know who you are. You are Jesus, the Christ, the Savior. I know who I am. A sinner. Have mercy on me. Lord, I am dependent upon your mercy. Even the good that I do, I do for show. Have mercy. That is the medieval Jesus Prayer, which comes from this passage, and this passage speaks to me today.

The Pharisee distorted by a community who wanted to play church, and in their name, he played holy, and in their name, he pointed and judged so that neither he nor they would have to look at themselves. The tax collector who had nothing that was his own except a broken heart and a sliver of hope that God is indeed merciful, and he threw himself upon God's mercy. Jesus said that one, the one who was real, that one who knew who he was before God and others, that one who threw himself before God's mercy, that one went home justified rather the other one because that one was real, real.

Let us be real in our worship, real in our faith. Let us drop all pretense and be real. Let us never be guilty of playing church. Let us never judge others to make ourselves feel better. Let us never be guilty of having baptized brains, but hearts of stone. Let us be those who pray sincerely. Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. If you want to pray that at this altar, don't you dare let any pretense stop you. My title I will close with. Give God something to work with. Give God your real self. You'll have every right to expect God to respond to your giving your real self. From these words from Ezekiel, God promises a new heart, a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit within you, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. Give God something to work with. Give God your real self. Amen.