

**Proper 25, Year C (RCL) – *Accepting God’s Forgiveness***  
**Joel 2:23-32; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14; Psalm 65**  
**The Rev. Skip Bushee – 10/28/07**

If Jesus were here with us today, he might tell the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector a bit differently. The story might go something like this:

“Two people went to St. Peter’s to pray, a long-time parishioner and an ex-con, who had recently been released from prison having served a sentence for embezzling funds from his company. The long time parishioner sat in a comfortable pew the front of the church and prayed loudly, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, drug addicts, adulterers, or even this shabby-looking ex-con. I am a cradle Episcopalian, I tithe to the Church, I serve on the vestry, and I contribute to various charities that help keep homeless people off the streets so that I don’t have to look at them.’

But the ex-con, standing by himself in the back of the church, would not even sit in a pew or look up at the altar. He stood there and, with tears in his eyes, quietly prayed, “God be merciful to me, a sinner. I have cheated my family, my friends, my fellow employees and my stockholders. I have spent the money I have stolen on frivolous things and now I am alone in the world with nothing. I can’t get a job and have no place to go.”

As Jesus tells us, it is not the arrogant parishioner who is justified, despite her long standing membership in the church, her good works and her monetary gifts; it is the humble person, who, despite his great sins, comes to God with a contrite and open heart.

Are the Pharisee in the original parable or the arrogant parishioner in my updated version bad people? Certainly not. Believe me, we would love to have a few more of them around St. Peter’s. They give liberally to the Church and to other worthy causes. They devote their time and energy to the Church and to other charitable organizations and they are here every Sunday filling the pews. In all respects, save one, they are model members of the faith.

The only problem is that they believe that they are justified solely by their works. Their prayers are filled with the “I” pronoun. I did this and I did that. Never anything like, “God blessed me by using me to do this.” They stand before the church looking smug and effectively proclaiming to all that they are justified. These people need their actions to be recognized by others, not being satisfied that their good works are seen by God. What’s worse is that they look down their noses at those they deem not worthy, believing that theirs is the one true path and all others are doomed to Hell.

There is a story of a woman who was met by St. Peter at the Pearly Gates (“Aw, jeez; not another story about St. Peter and the Pearly Gates”). Anyway, this woman was told by St. Peter that she needed 10,000 points to enter Heaven and to list her good deeds on Earth so they could see if she had earned enough. The woman said that she had been a member of a church most of her life. “That will be 10 points,” said St. Peter. “I worshipped almost every week,” she added. “That’s worth 20 points,” said St. Peter. “I was head of

the Altar Guild for 20 years,” the woman proclaimed. “We’ll give you 25 points for that one,” replied St. Peter. “Let’s see, I was president of the PTA for five years,” she continued. “Ten more points,” declared St. Peter.

Finally, St. Peter asked the woman, “Do you think that you will ever get into Heaven?”

“Only by the grace of God will I be able to make it,” she replied.

“Exactly,” exclaimed St. Peter as he opened wide the gates of Heaven.

Unlike the Pharisee or the arrogant parishioner, the woman confronting St. Peter finally had the humility to accept the fact that all of her good works on Earth would be insufficient to earn her a place in Heaven. At the end of the day, we are all in the same boat, Pharisees, loyal parishioners, lifelong sinners, even clergy. No matter what our deeds in life, good or bad, we still need to accept the fact of our powerlessness and allow the warmth of God’s grace to envelop us.

At the same time, it is easy to see the sinner in this parable as the hero. Although he was justified by grace in the end, he still spent his life as a sinner. Can you imagine what the world would be like if it were filled only by people like this? People who spend their lives taking from others and giving little back.

Two weeks ago, I went down to Orange County to officiate at the memorial service for my uncle, a man who certainly qualified as a lifelong sinner. He was born into wealth and spent his life in pursuit of more wealth and the enjoyment of it. He was a consummate playboy and never went to church. He said that he would only go to church if his pal Harvey went with him, knowing that Harvey used him as his excuse for not attending. He did a number of good things in his life but he also wasted much of it in frivolous pursuit of pleasure. At the end of his life he was alone and bitter.

And yet, I am told that on his deathbed, he finally accepted God’s grace and died in peace. I believe that he is with God today as yet another example of the sinner in the parable.

Perhaps the most beautiful part of this parable is the humble act of contrition performed by the sinner. Sadly, this is something we have lost in our liturgy. In our zeal to eliminate guilt from our theology and turn the Church into a happy place, we tend to hurry past the confessional, never taking the time to truly reflect on our sins and place them on God’s table so they can be gently lifted from us. Gone from our liturgy are the beautiful prayers that so eloquently expressed our sinfulness and unworthiness. Do you remember words like, “The remembrance of (our sins) is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable.” Or “we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.”

We perform this act of contrition not to make us feel guilty for our sins but quite the opposite. We do this to feel the joy of knowing that our sins are truly forgiven and to

allow us to continue with our lives without the burden of them. If we fail to go through the process of confession and absolution, we continue to carry those sins hidden deep within us and if we continue to repress them, they will eventually come to the surface as inappropriate anger or hostility. But if we can truly accept the fact that we are sinners, become aware of the burden we bear because of those sins, and then allow God's healing grace to fill us with joy, we can go back to our homes feeling just a little bit lighter and a little bit better prepared to handle whatever life brings our way.

Because of the greatness of his transgressions, the sinner in our parable received the greatest relief when his sins were absolved. But the Pharisee was a sinner too. Like many of us here today, he was not willing to open up to his sinfulness and accept the blessing of God's forgiveness. If we can take a little extra time during our confessional this morning to acknowledge our sinfulness and then allow ourselves to feel God's grace wash over us as the priest proclaims absolution, I promise you that this will become an especially joyful day.