

Pentecost 22C Proper 25 Sermon 102410
Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22; Psalm 84 or 84:1-6
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Last year's Oscar-winning Sandra Bullock film, *The Blind Side*, has many memorable scenes in it. But there is one that really struck me as I worked on this week's sermon.

If there is anyone here who has not seen the movie, it is the true story of a wealthy, white family in Memphis, who – through the truly Christian heart of the wife and mother of the family, Leigh Ann Touhy – decide to take in a very large homeless and aimless young African American man. Ultimately the young man, Michael Oher became a full member of the Touhy family, began to play football, got a scholarship to Ole' Miss, and in 2009 became a member of the NFL's Baltimore Ravens in the first round of the draft.

After the Touheys had taken Michael into their home, Leigh Ann began to look into the possibility of becoming his legal guardian because he literally had no one else in his life. As Leigh Ann sat in a very fancy restaurant (eating what she described as an overpriced \$18.00 salad) with her equally wealthy friends, the subject of Michael came up in conversation. At first her friends made fun of Michael – comparing him to King Kong and Leigh Ann to Jessica Lang. Leigh Ann made it plain to her friends that she was not going to listen to an ongoing diatribe against Michael. Her friends apologized and began to unctuously praise her for changing Michael's life. Then, one of her friends

said, “But what about (your teenage daughter)? ... She’s a girl and he’s a boy – a very large black boy – sleeping under the same roof.” At which point, Leigh Ann looked at her with a steady gaze and simply replied, “Shame on you.” as she picked up the check and walked away from the table. .

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector can teach us many things. But one of them should undoubtedly be the same lesson that Leigh Ann Touhy hopefully taught her friends that day. There is no place in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ for looking down one’s nose at someone else – particularly if you are doing so in the context of exalting your own Christian virtue.

When we are doing well in our lives – whether economically, socially or in terms of our church lives – it is not only easy, but extremely tempting for us to become prideful, self-righteous and even contemptuous of others. When we look at our own lives, it is so easy to look around and say to ourselves, “Thank God I am not like _____!” You fill in the blank.

And believe me clergy are not immune from this phenomenon. I am off to Clergy Conference tomorrow and I promise that I will hear my brother and sister clergy from large, wealthy congregations make reference to small churches like ours as if we are somehow beneath them. Not all of them do that, but some assuredly do. And I listen to other members of the Hardin County Ministerial Alliance talk about their theologies and I have to constantly remind *myself* that it is absolutely inappropriate for me to be praying

under my breath, “Thank you God that I am not like one of these fundamentalists!” This judgmental form of Christian prayer has an easy allure and can arise in myriad arenas.

For many Americans – even in tough economic times like these (or perhaps more so when times are hard) – it is very easy to look at those in our country who cannot make ends meet without help as being “lazy,” “no good,” or as “sponging off society.” When *you* give to your church and charities, support your family, pay your bills and still have enough money left to eat out occasionally, it is easy see the homeless, or those who are on welfare and to say to yourself, “Thank you God that I am not like ‘those people’ who leach off society and cause me to pay more in taxes.”

But as I read this week in the Daily Office reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus, I was reminded again that the “problem of the poor,” has been around forever. 21st Century Americans are not the first people to complain bitterly about having to care for the less fortunate. Jesus once told the Disciples that “the poor will always be with you” He undoubtedly was also familiar with the 11th Chapter of Ecclesiasticus where it says,

Do not boast about wearing fine clothes, and do not exalt yourself when you are honored; for the works of the Lord are wonderful, and his works are concealed from humankind.

...

There are those who work and struggle and hurry, but are so much the more in want. There are others who are slow and need help, who lack strength and abound in poverty; but the eyes of the Lord look kindly upon them; he

lifts them out of their lowly condition and raises up their heads to the amazement of the many.

The Pharisee's prayer in the parable was the epitome of what is wrong with human understanding of the Kingdom of God. As I have told you before, everything we have; all that we are; comes from God and we become not only hypocrites, but idolaters if we look down on someone else for their circumstances. When we look down on anyone else, we take credit for our own situations, thereby becoming our own gods. Rather than "Thank you God that I am not like him," our prayer should be more closely aligned with the one of the tax collector; something like, "I know that I'm not worthy, but thank you anyway, God."

Now we should be careful about over-generalizing this parable. There is nothing inherently bad or Pharisaical about *us* because we are *not* poor or otherwise "humbled" in society. But ... the day that we come into the church and pray, "Thank you, Lord for making me different than ... whomever," we are in really bad shape. Because it doesn't matter who we put into the blank in the sentence, "Thank you for making me different than _____," we are already on the wrong side of the equation.

Jesus told this story to show people that His true disciples, those who really want to follow Him, know their relationship to the Creator of the universe. They know that they are not favored beings because of their faith – and certainly not because of their works – but rather they are justified and blessed solely and completely through the grace of God.

It is interesting that Jesus didn't make it plain that the Pharisee in the story was that big a hypocrite. We know that he was, because we know human nature. No one is that perfect. We all have our little flaws and foibles – our Achilles heels as it were. But Jesus didn't focus on that either. His message was subtler than that. The Pharisee – with his inherent human hypocrisy – could have been just as justified as the tax collector, if only he had recognized that justification comes *only* from the grace of God, not from being “superior” to others by virtue of your own works.

The tax collector's recognition of the relationship he had with God was the key to this parable. The Pharisee believed that all he *did*, the praying, the fasting and the tithing, was enough to *earn* his way into God's Kingdom. The tax collector recognized that, no matter what he did or what he didn't do, he was *always* going to be unworthy of the perfection of the Kingdom of God. So the tax collector just said, “Please, have mercy on me. Don't ever give me what I deserve. Instead, give me what you want me to have.”

That's the key – knowing who we are, and who God is in our relationship. We are made in the image of God. We are children of God. We are the beloved of God. Those are all wonderful things, for which we should eternally give thanks. But we didn't *earn* any of them. Not one of us *can* earn any of them. We were made in God's image because that's what God wanted. We are God's beloved children because God has grace enough to favor us with those gifts. No matter what, neither the Pharisee nor I – nor any of you – can *earn* God's blessings. They are strictly gifts of God's grace.

So ... if our justification – and our blessings – come strictly from the grace of God, how could we possibly look down upon someone else who is, or has less? The simple answer is; we cannot. But when we do look down on others, as we inevitably will, we should stop and think about our Savior, the one who humbled Himself completely in order to graciously assure us of salvation. Think of the now resurrected and ascended Jesus sitting on the throne of judgment and looking at you with an even, steady gaze and saying, “Shame on you.”

Amen.