

I came across these descriptions of an optimist. An optimist is one who takes 4 pounds of steak, 5 pounds of charcoal and ONE match to a picnic. Optimists are parents who have 3 teenage children and ONE car. And my favorite: an optimist is a man getting married at the age of 75 – and looking for a home near a SCHOOL.

First, some background on this gospel text. Most people around the world don't seem to like paying taxes! Has anyone ever said anything so profound?! And thus it has ever been. But in the first century, the context of Jesus' original hearers, tax collectors were a truly loathsome lot. The Roman government was a hostile occupying military force in Israel. But the Romans auctioned off the job of tax collector in each local village to the Israelite who paid the highest bribe. In return, the tax collector was granted the privilege of squeezing the tax out of his Jewish neighbors – plus any amount he could collect in addition, which the tax collector could pocket for himself. Tax collectors were not like our IRS; they were more like the Mafia. All it took to be a tax collector was an insatiable greed, the willingness to sell your neighbors and family for an extra shekel, and thick enough skin to live the lonely life of a despised outcast from polite and religious society. Tax collectors were considered unclean and unwelcome in the places of worship and other gathering spaces. Rabbis taught that religious Jews could justifiably lie on only 2 occasions – to someone who wanted to take your life, or to a tax collector.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, enjoyed the unqualified respect of the Israelite community. Pharisees were not the elite religious professionals, like the priests who tended the Temple – or the Sanhedrin who sat in the seats of power in Jerusalem. The Pharisees were religious volunteers, laymen who did something else for a living, but who studied and taught and observed the religious Law with scrupulous care. If the Sanhedrin priests were the religious professional athletes of the day, the Pharisees were the exceptional amateurs, like Olympic athletes or collegiate athletes, of the religious arena. And by and large, the people loved and respected them more than any other sect within Judaism. Much of that respect was hard-earned by their careful practice of obedience to the commands of Scripture. If the Bible commanded a tithe to be paid from their income, they would pay a double tithe. (Listen – I'd LOVE to have a couple of that kind of Pharisee in our parish! Just saying! But I digress) If the Bible commanded weekly worship in the synagogue, they would appear daily. They were classic over-achievers when it came to religion. (adapted from GRACEWORKS, 23 October, 2022, p. 15-16)

Second, so what are we supposed to make of this strange parable? Once again, the key to interpretation is there in the opening line: "Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else." As church-goers, we generally don't despise people, but we can certainly feel superior. There is a Spanish idiom that refers to someone who is proud, someone who acts superior to everybody around them. The literal translation is "You think you're the last Coca Cola in the desert." That's the kind of person that Pharisee is. And his problem is that he has taken his focus off of his goal – GOD – and started to look around and see himself as superior to everyone else. And that's a sin. Yes, he IS truly better than the tax collector. But the tax collector knows he is a sinner and simply begs for mercy. The pharisee doesn't even think he needs mercy. He's the last and biggest coca cola in the desert in his mind. But remember WHY Jesus told the parables – to reveal the character of God and the nature of God's kingdom. His goal is never to shame us, but to show us what we're missing out on when we don't understand the heart of God. And when we begin to understand God's heart, we realize how poorly ours measure up to that great, inclusive, merciful, forgiving, compassionate heart of God. Because when we see how great God's heart is, we want to have a heart like that. Which means we need to change, be converted. Get a bigger heart.

Over 1600 years ago, St. Augustine wrote to one of his students about what it takes to understand the truth of God. He said it requires 3 qualities. The first is humility; the second is humility; the third, humility."

But why are brokenness and humility necessary for us to understand God? Kyle Idleman wrote a book titled AHA: GOD MOMENTS THAT CAN CHANGE OUR LIVES. Idleman was asked: "What advice do you have for people who have tried and tried to change certain areas of their lives, and for whatever reason, they've failed at it?"

Idleman replied the reason some people can't move on to positive change in their spiritual lives is because they've never experienced real brokenness. He says, "As a pastor, I'll ask people who are in the process of transformation and change, have you cried about it?"

This is the point where most of us walk away. This is the point where we retreat into our comfortable lives and miss out on the joy of humility and repentance: "Have we cried about it?" We avoid brokenness as much as possible. We try to protect our ego, our image, our self-sufficiency as much as possible: "I'm a good person, especially compared to them! Look at all the good things I've done. Look at how I've played by the rules, worked hard and become a success. I go to church every Sunday; I don't steal and I don't commit adultery. I'm a good person." I'm always amused when a person comes to confession and says "I don't know what to confess; I haven't done anything wrong." If they are married, I always suggest "ask your spouse!" But if we haven't done anything wrong, have we done anything RIGHT? Or what are we still leaving out? Like tithing, like care for the poor, work for justice, being inclusive, always, always always loving. But the truth is that we're still mostly trying to earn God's approval. And there is an inverse relationship between earning God's approval and receiving God's mercy. The tax collector stood before God in his brokenness, not with any achievements. And Jesus said he alone went away justified.

So the one who thought he was the last coca cola in the desert missed the boat, and the other, who knew he was a sinner, relied on God's mercy. There are 5 words used to express the idea of mercy, compassion or pity in the New Testament. In our story today, when the tax collector prays, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," he uses an unusual word for mercy. He uses a Greek word that refers to pardoning a criminal or making atonement for another's sin. Atonement in the Old Testament is translated as 'to cover.' God instituted the practice among the Hebrew people of making an animal sacrifice to cover over their sins. This was an atoning sacrifice. When the tax collector pleads for mercy in this prayer, he is saying, "God, I'm a sinner. I'll never be good enough to deserve your forgiveness. I need you to cover over my sins – to take my place and be my atoning sacrifice." And, of course, Christ Himself became that atoning sacrifice.

Third, where do we fit in all of this? What did we expect when we came to Mass today? Did we expect to enter into the presence of the living God, the Creator of the universe, the Almighty? Did we expect God to meet us here? More importantly, did we expect God to change our lives?

Generally, it seems we expect very little from God. We expect to walk out these church doors exactly the same as we came in. And that is the tragic outcome of our self-righteousness. I'm good enough. I'm comfortable with my current priorities and agenda and good deeds. Nothing in me is broken. I don't tithe, but I never believed in that anyway, and we have our eyes on another big cruise or a remodel of our kitchen, beach/mountain house. Nothing needs to change. Nothing in me needs to die. That's convinced of our own righteousness.

But if we don't need to change, then why did Jesus say, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." (Mt 16:24-25)

The tax collector stood in the presence of the Holy God and didn't try to hide his sin and his brokenness and his shame. He recognized God's holiness and his own helplessness. So he confessed his sin and cried out for mercy, and he received the fullness of God's love, the pardoning of all his sins, all by God's grace. Not because he deserved it, simply because that is who God is and what God offers to those who humble themselves and seek Him with all their heart.

Henri Nouwen deeply understood our struggle with self-righteousness and humility when he wrote this beautiful prayer: Dear God, I am so afraid to open my clenched fists! Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to? Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands? Please help me to gradually open my hands and to discover that I am not what I own, but what you want to give me.

2 men went up to the temple to pray. Only 1 of them left there pardoned, changed, set free from the burden of his sin. What made the difference? One man showed up with empty hands and asked God to do for him what he could not do for himself. And God did the rest. I don't know what we were expecting when we came to church today. I hope we were expecting to draw closer to God and be changed. If so, then we need honest confession, the willingness to recognize that we can not save ourselves, and the humility to open our hands to what God wishes to give us. And leave here changed by the mercy of the God who gave His own life on the cross to save us, sinners all. Amen. (last 2 sections adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, 23 October 2022, p. 32-34)