**The Diocese of New Jersey – Stewardship Sunday**

**20 Pentecost – Proper 25 – Year C – October 23, 2022**

**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14**

**Preacher: The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, *Bishop of New Jersey***

*“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt…”* Luke 18:9

As the request of [Project Resource,](https://dioceseofnj.org/project-resource/) our Stewardship Commission in the Diocese of New Jersey, ably co-chaired by The Reverend Bon Fitzpatrick of Grace Church, Merchantville and Eva Lesniak of Church of the Holy Spirit, Lebanon, we have designated the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2022, Stewardship Sunday in the Diocese of New Jersey. I am deeply thankful to both of them, and the entire Project Resource Team, who have worked tirelessly, especially throughout the COVID19 pandemic, to provide our congregations with the resources they have needed to meet the challenges of our times.

Today, it is our hope that all our congregations will give special focus to the topic of Stewardship. More than a topic, I hope our churches will give focus to Stewardship as a discipline today, a Christian discipline, practice, something we do, because we are followers of Jesus Christ; not as an imposed obligation and chore, but rather as our faith-filled response of love to the love God so abundantly shows to us.

Being clear about our motivation here is important. We live in such a transactional society, it’s easy for us to fool ourselves about what we are doing and why we are doing it. Today’s Gospel reading underscores this. The story is familiar. Perhaps, too familiar. It’s actually, a very tricky reading. It’s a story often referred to as The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. In Luke’s Gospel, it’s in chapter 18 right on the heels of the story of the “Unjust Judge” which was the Gospel reading for last Sunday.[[1]](#endnote-1) Both stories are unique to Luke’s Gospel.

Whereas last week, Luke was addressing his disciples, this week, Jesus addresses “those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt” (Lk. 18:9). He then tells a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector. As Luke tells it, it is clear the Pharisee is the “fall guy” in the story – that is, among those who trust in themselves and regard others with contempt.”

It is an unfortunate truth that, at times, our Gospel uses designations and labels that have subsequently contributed to stereotyping, bigotry and even antisemitism. This seems to be one of those instances. Countering this, contemporary biblical scholar Francisco Garcia observes on the [Working Preacher](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-5) website, “*within the broader Jewish tradition, the Pharisees are not understood as legalistic, rigid, and elitist. On the contrary, because of their attention to oral tradition and interpreting the spirit of the Torah, they are seen to have played an essential role in ensuring the theological and spiritual continuity of Judaism, and rabbinical Judaism in particular, to this day.*”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Having acknowledged the trap into which stereotyping can lead us, it is also true that the text does capture a characteristic human tendency. As biblical scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson writes, “The parable is one that invites internalization by every reader [hearer] because it speaks to something deep within the heart of every human. The love of God can so easily turn into an idolatrous self-love; the gift can be so quickly seized as a possession; what comes from another can so blithely be turned into self-accomplishment. Prayer can be transformed into boasting.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Johnson continues, “The pious one is all convoluted comparison and contrast because he cannot stop counting his possessions. His prayer is one of peripheral vision. Worse, he assumes God’s role as judge: not only does he enumerate his own claims to being just, he reminds God of the deficiencies of the tax-agent in case God had not noticed.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Of course, even here with this kind reading, the parable seduces us into the very thing about which the parable is attempting to criticize – judgementalism and self-righteousness. “I thank God I am not like that Pharisee!”

Lutheran pastor and noted preacher David Lose gets to the heart of this when he writes, *This is what makes this parable so hard to preach. Indeed, what makes this parable a trap. For as soon as we fall prey to the temptation to divide humanity into any kind of groups, we have aligned ourselves squarely with the Pharisee.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

Lose continues, *Whether our division is between righteous and sinners, as with the Pharisee, or even between the self-righteous and the humble, as with Luke, we are doomed.”*  Lose concludes,  *Anytime you draw a line between who’s “in” and who’s “out,” this parable asserts, you will find God on the other side. Read this way, the parable ultimately escapes even its narrative setting and reveals that it is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it is about a pious Pharisee and desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is about God: God who alone can judge the human heart; God who determines to justify the ungodly.[[6]](#endnote-6)*

Fred Craddock recognizes that today’s Gospel reading puts into the form of a parable Paul’s teaching on justification by faith through grace.[[7]](#endnote-7) “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, St. Paul writes in Ephesians 2, “it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

It's all about God…All about God and God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We are what God has made us. The good works we do, including our financial stewardship, including our giving of time and talent, we do because God made us for these, we do them by God’s grace as our thankful response to the love God has so abundantly and freely bestowed on us. To God be the glory in our serving. To God be the glory in our loving. To God be the glory in our giving. To God be the glory in our living and whenever that day comes, to God be the glory in our dying.

As you consider your financial commitment to the church this year as part of your Christian discipline and discipleship, or as you consider a major gift or a legacy gift, which I encourage you to do, try not to think of all the things you’ve done for God. Rather, consider all that God has done for you and in this give thanks. And then let God judge your heart.

1. See Luke 18:1-8 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Garcia, Francisco “Commentary on Luke 18:9-14” – Working Preacher website for October 23, 2022 found at [Commentary on Luke 18:9-14 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-5) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Craddock, Fred B *Interpretation – A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 274 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lose, David “Commentary on Luke 18:9-14” – Working Preacher website for October 24, 2010 found at [Commentary on Luke 18:9-14 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Craddock p. 210 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ephesian 2:8 - 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)