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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/23/2016, The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 30
Luke 18:9-14

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday's Gospel Lesson concluded with a haunting question. Jesus asks this:

...when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?
(Luke 18:8, RSV)

That was Luke 18:8. Immediately after that question, Jesus tells today's parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector and the different manner of their praying. It is as if Jesus is saying, "When I return, I do indeed expect to find faith on earth. And the sort of faith I hope to find *is not the condemning kind*. It is not the faith of the Pharisee who lords it over the tax collector. Rather, it is the simple faith of the penitent who hopes for divine mercy, beats his chest, and breathes his Kyrie, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'"

I mean to look at the Pharisee and the tax collector, but before turning to them, I would like to linger a bit with what I have called our Lord's "haunting question":

...when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?
(Luke 18:8, RSV)

I hope that each of us, when we hear this question, will quietly answer to himself, to herself, "Yes, he will find faith on earth, if *I* have anything to do with it! For *I* mean to be found faithful and I mean to do what I can that others will be found faithful too."

I have been thinking recently about the story of the Prodigal Son. We looked at that story just this past week, at the Monday Evening Bible Study. One of the ideas that struck me about that magnificent story is this: the wayfaring son must have retained in his memory the thought of his father's love. And that made all the difference in the world for him. It was because of his memory of his father's love that he could gather himself together, shake off the dull sloth of vice and the misery into which it had led him, and go home. It was because the son retained, in unforgettable fashion, the conviction that his father loved him that he could dare to go back home, even after all the mischief he had committed and all the dishonoring of his father and his father's ways. The young man retained a sense of his father's love. It permitted him to turn his life around and come back home.

You and I do not have perfect mastery over other people, including those who are close to us and dear to us. We cannot compel them into Christian faith. There might even come a stage in life when we cannot even make them come to Sunday School or to the liturgy. But what we might be able to do is to instill in them the unshakable conviction that Jesus is good and worth living for. And maybe, someday, they will return. They will come home. We can do this much that when Jesus returns he will find faith on earth: we can resolve that we ourselves shall be found faithful and we can resolve that we will try to let others know that Jesus is good and will in no wise turn them out if they should ever want to come home to him.

Now, let's turn to this morning's Gospel story. One thing I think we can say about the tax collector in this story is that someone must have taught him about the love of our heavenly Father, for this man has not despaired. He has not given up hope. Clearly he has done wrong, and we need only to read the daily newspapers to be reminded that people can do some terrible things in this world. This man has done wrong, with all the damage that might have meant. Even in his own eyes he has done wrong, and yet, God bless him, he does not consider it hopeless that he should cry out to God for mercy. His Kyrie does not fade away into silence, as if there is no point to it. Someone has taught him well. Someone has taught him that even if he should be the most wicked and miserable of sinners, still the Lord is willing to hear his cry for mercy. Maybe mother taught this to him long ago. Maybe it was father or a friend. Somehow, there dwells in the heart of this tax collector the memory of God's love, so that even one as lowdown and disreputable a character as he is, can still lift his voice and his prayers up to Almighty God. He might not be able to lift up his eyes toward heaven, but he can aim his prayers there. His prayers might be those of a sinful being on earth, and they are addressed to holy heaven, but holy heaven is glad to hear those prayers. Someone has taught this man well, I say, that he has not sunk in despair, but believes that he can still cry out to God for mercy.

The Confession service in our *Lutheran Book of Worship* liturgy for "Prayer at the Close of the Day" contains a powerful echo of the humility of this tax collector. The liturgy asks of all Christians that we make the cry of the tax collector to be our own. The words and gestures might be familiar to you. You can find them on page 155 in the front half of our worship book. At the close of the day, we begin our evening prayer with this confession:

- ☐ I confess to God Almighty, before the whole company of heaven, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by [striking the breast three times] my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault; wherefore I pray God

Almighty to have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins,
and bring me to everlasting life. Amen

And then come the sweet words of absolution:

☐ The almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon,
forgiveness, and remission of all your sins. Amen

It all mirrors the story of the humble tax collector in this morning's Gospel story. That sad man "went down to his house justified" (Luke 18:14). Wonderful words! He went home justified because he cast all his hopes upon God and his mercy. He did not brag of his virtues, for he had reached the stage in life when he was no longer interested in his own virtues, but rather in the mercy and the goodness of God.

So, the tax collector did well. He is an example of faith on earth – the kind of faith that does not trust in its own righteousness, but rather throws itself in hope upon our beautiful Savior.

But the Pharisee in this story did not do so well. It is hard for me to speak ill of this man, for I have lived long enough to know that it is not always easy to live a good life. It takes much discipline, much denying of oneself, much resisting of temptation, much obedience to the holy law of God. This Pharisee walked that hard road. In the eyes of others and in his own eyes, he has done the best he could. He is the kind of person who makes a community strong: law-abiding, faithful to his wife, pious, contributing to the commonwealth by way of his taxes. He would be a good neighbor, I suspect.

So it is hard for me to speak ill of this man, but I must in some true measure. Something ails him. Something is not quite right with this law-abiding Pharisee. Let me put the matter in terms of one of my favorite images of the church: The church is not a society of saints, but rather a hospital for sinners. In church—in our gathering here at Immanuel this morning, for example—the great and holy thing about our gathering is that we have come into the presence of the Great Physician of our bodies and souls. And what ails the Pharisee in this morning's story is that he pretends that he has no ills, so how is he going to get better?

The tax collector, by contrast, is like a sufferer who goes to the doctor and does not pretend that all is well. He wisely reveals his troubles to the One he expects can help him.

Not so this Pharisee. He turns his prayers to God, but hides his troubles, hides his flaws.

And the thing is, he does indeed have flaws. Especially I have in mind his haughty attitude toward the tax collector. Both of these men stand before God who is judge of all. Both of them stand before the One who knows the heart inside and out. They both stand naked before a holy God who knows their

every sin and can perceive every atom of failure and weakness in them. The Pharisee does not need to judge the tax collector — leave that to God! The Pharisee has his own path to walk, and he should attend to that. Indeed, the Pharisee should try with all his might to sympathize with the tax collector. The righteous one should reckon to himself, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” The Pharisee should sorrow for a world that can tempt and pressure others into sin... that can let them down and mislead them, so that they fall. That is, the Pharisee should try to show more love for his neighbors, including this lowly neighbor, the tax collector.

When Jesus returns will he find faith on earth? Yes, if we have any say in the matter! The things of life can break us downward. Both the things we have suffered and the bad things we have done can tempt us toward despair. But do not despair. Pray on, fight the good fight of faith, and never lose heart.

This past Friday, Carol and I went to an Atlantic District Mission gathering down in Maryland, near Baltimore. We heard fine lectures and enjoyed the fellowship, but most moving of all was the sermon at the end of the day. The preacher told us that his wife had recently died. She had been helpless for fourteen years, owing to a car accident that happened right outside the church we were sitting. There was no justice in that accident. Since that terrible accident, the five daughters of this couple had married, but the mother was not able to participate in the weddings. Thirteen grandchildren had been born, but this mother had not been able to hold them in her arms. This is the kind of event - this awful accident - that can break down faith in those who love the injured one. In a hundred quiet ways, this is the kind of tragedy that can break down faith throughout the congregation. But not so this family, and not so this congregation. They all rallied around the injured woman and family for fourteen years. They laughed, they wept, they took care of each other. Dean David McGettigan told me that he was present for the funeral of this woman and that the preacher summarized things just right: The Gospel, one. Satan, zero!

When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth? Well, if this family and this congregation down in Maryland have any say in the matter, yes, indeed! Jesus shall find faith on earth. And if you and I have any say in the matter, yes, indeed, Jesus shall find faith on earth. It is the nature and the freedom of Christians to pray always and to never lose heart.

If the hard things of life should lead us to humility like that of the repentant tax collector, then good enough. Let life lead us to humility. But never to despair. No matter what has happened to us in life and no matter what we have done, let us persevere in prayer and never lose heart.

When Christ returns, the kind of faith he seeks is not the haughty, condemning kind, like that of the Pharisee in today's Gospel story. Rather, Jesus shall seek the humble and gentle kind of faith—indeed the kind of mercy and love that Jesus himself lives by and asks us to live by too. To this

Great Physician of body and soul be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.