

A Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

October 27, 2013 – Luke 18: 9-14

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About three weeks ago I read the Gospel for this morning so I might begin pondering. And wasn't I just more than a little pleased that the message seemed so obvious. Another parable...another story of two seeming opposites...the Pharisee who stands in the temple and *tells God* how he's got it all together...doing all the right things...everything on the straight and narrow...not – heaven forbid – like that guy over there. The tax collector...so remorseful he can't even face God...beating his breast...begging for God's mercy. And parables being what they are, it doesn't take a much to figure out which one of this unlikely pair will be exalted, and which will be humbled. Got it!

So, a few days ago when my beloved inquired how my sermon was coming along, I said, 'I've got this one knocked. It's glaringly obvious.' When he asked for a hint at what it might be about, I replied, "Humility!" It was at that point that he gave me one of those kind and gentle looks and said, "You just preached about humility a month or so ago." Rats!

Now, it is not particularly appropriate to bend and shape the sharing of the Good News to conform to any manner of timetable or preference on the part of the one who is doing the sharing. If there was nothing in Luke 18:9-14 other than humility we would proceed from there apace. But I was – personally – humbled enough to go back and read again...and as so often happens, something else was hiding there. It says, in the very last verse, 'this man – the repentant tax collector – went down to his home justified rather than the other...' And immediately we assume that the tax collector has just scored points with God...that, at the very least, the Pharisee has just made an utter fool of himself in God's sight...that the point here is that we had best start damping down our thoughts of self-exaltation and cultivate a little humility.

But I would ask you this...did either of these two men...do we...ever lose God's love?

God's love. That, I think, is what lies at the heart of this parable...and probably every parable we encounter in the Gospels for that matter. God's love...no matter what. No matter how far from the mark of goodness the Pharisee or the rich man who couldn't see Lazarus or the unjust judge who panders to the widow may fall...no matter how far from the mark we may fall...God's love is always there. Freely given. Nothing asked for in return. Undying. Unbending. Unending.

God's love. I am not sure there is anything more difficult to fully understand. Human love is difficult enough...and we have daily expressions of human love – and sadly the absence of human love – by the thousands. But in our love for one another

there is someone there – someone we can see and touch and hear. Someone who mirrors our love, reflecting it back in ways that we can comprehend.

God's love is the greatest gift, the perfect gift, the one true gift. And yet it is so far beyond our understanding that oftentimes we do not even try to cope with it. How do we take into ourselves the notion that it is God's love that breathed us into being? How do we understand that it is through the power of God's love that we can love each other...and even love ourselves? How do we reconcile the love of God – so far beyond that which we can comprehend – with a world that aches and moans with disease and addiction and greed...mistrust and grinding poverty and cruelty?

This is all very difficult to wrap one's brain around. And maybe that is a huge part of a lesson learned...this being loved by God – and loving God in return – isn't so much brain stuff as it is heart stuff, and soul stuff. When did our own love – so puny in the face of God's love – ever make sense? Love is wildly and beautifully irrational...serendipitous...passionate...nonsensical...full of grace. The tax-collector in the parable was not exalted because he confessed his sin. He was exalted because in the confessing of his sins he emptied himself and opened himself to be filled with God's love and forgiveness. The Pharisee was not humbled because of his arrogance. He was humbled because in preoccupation with reciting his resume in the temple, he was too full of himself to let God's love in. Both of these men needed God's love. One came empty and was filled. The other came full...and left unfulfilled. The gift of God's love is that it is always with us – just as it would be with the Pharisee – ready to pour forth when we make the space. That's all loving God is, really...just making the space to let God's love in.

As Joseph Pagano said in our silent meditation – in oh such joyful words! - The love that moves the sun and the other stars, the love that creates, sustains, and redeems the cosmos, is always uttering its eternal "Yes" to our question "Do you love me?" The only thing we need to do is open ourselves to that love and return it. Everything else is a veil before our eyes, thrown up by our culture, our career, and our churches. All self-flattery and self-importance and self-righteousness ends in futility. When we stop reciting our resumes in the temple, the incarnate love of God meets us and embraces us, saying I know your pain, my beloved, and I forgive your sins. I know your emptiness, and I will fill it and I will fill you with my melting love.

I would like to close with a parable of my own creation. A parable of what I believe to be love in its purest human form. A true story that is much on my heart right now. It is the story of a little boy...and his blanket. A little boy who will be five years old next Sunday. A little boy who, like so many little ones, has had – all of his brief life – a very special blanket. You and I would not see it as particularly special. It is not hand-knit, nor colorful. It is what we used to call a receiving blanket...pale, and unremarkable green in color. It is the blanket that wrapped him on the chilly autumn day he went home from the hospital. The blanket that swaddled him when

he was very small. The blanket that, over the years, became not only his constant companion, but a very handy companion at that. It could be wedged in the car window to keep the sun out of his eyes on car trips. It made a wonderful tablecloth when he played restaurant – a tent when he went pretend camping – a protector when his stuffed animals had to go to the play hospital. It slept with him at night, rode along with him in the sidecar of his papa's bicycle, and was tucked in his backpack every day when he went to preschool. He even put it in the refrigerator on hot days so that it might cool him. Two weeks ago, on the first day of a family vacation, the blanket went missing. Despair ensued, but was kept at bay by the excitement of each day's adventures. It was only when the trip was over, and the little boy was back in his own home, preparing for sleep in his own bed, that sorrow engulfed him. After the traditional story time, and singing of songs, our sad little man seemed ready to surrender to sleep. The light was turned down, the door was closed, and the floodgate of tears opened. His mother rubbed his back, and tried to console him, and hiccupping through his sobs, he said, "I am so very, very sad. Blankie is lost and I know it is lonely."

Now, in our infinite wisdom and maturity and experience, we can say, "Tsk, tsk. How sweet, but a blanket is a piece of cloth and has no feelings. He'll get over it." But to me this is a story of love, pure and simple. And maybe it takes us a little closer to what God's love truly is. Ewan's blanket was a part of his life – and a part of him – in his mind, forever. And when it was gone, he did not mourn what he had lost, but mourned instead for what the blanket was feeling. He was not sad because he was now without, but sad because the blanket was alone. God does not love us with selfish love. God does not love us with an emotion that keeps score. God does not withhold love when we are less than perfect. God loves us always...and there is no doubt in my mind that when we are suffering or doubting, when we are so caught up in exalting ourselves or causing others pain...God still loves us. We may never fully understand this until we are absorbed into God's love in another time and place. But even in our confusion, our doubt, and – yes – our pain, we must never forget that God's love was, and is, and shall remain.