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

Today's parable is a familiar one; so familiar, in fact, that it might feel like watching a favorite movie for the tenth time or rereading a favorite novel. This is one that we've heard so many times that at face value, it doesn't seem to need much by way of explanation or deep thought.

Every time I read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, I think of my childhood growing up with five siblings. Because there were so many of us, we were always picking on each other or finding ways to misbehave without being caught by one of our parents. There were complicated sibling alliances that would be formed and broken in a matter of days depending on who was united and around what we had rallied. On more than one occasion I can recall one of us defending ourselves to our dad by saying, "Well, at least I'm not like him! I didn't do what he did!" We would then rattle off all the ways we were better than our siblings: we did chores without being asked, we didn't fight bedtime, we didn't throw spaghetti on the new kitchen rug, we didn't put sand in our friends' shoes. At the end of all of this, our dad would tell us that if we were actually being good, we wouldn't feel like we had to prove it to him. You can imagine how shocking that was for us. We thought that by naming all of the ways that we had done right, by pointing out to him the good things we had done, that we would be praised and affirmed in our goodness. We, like the Pharisee in the Gospel, felt justified in our goodness.

It's easy to imagine ourselves into this parable as the tax collector, standing humbly before God and asking for forgiveness for the wrongs we have done and the things we have left undone. And there is merit in that; in the Rite I form of our Eucharistic Prayer (which we almost never use at Thankful), we pray these ancient words: "We do not presume to come to this Thy table, most merciful Father, trusting in our own righteousness, but in Thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table." In meekness and humility we bow before God in reverence for the great deeds God has done. But it is all too easy to turn that meekness into a performance and begin to perform our piety for accolades.

We, too, can sound like the Pharisee who thanks God that he is not like other people. We tell ourselves that because we are good, upstanding citizens who put money in the collection plate and show up to church a few Sundays each month that we are somehow more righteous than those who don't. As Luke's gospel points out, Jesus told this parable to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Christ is inviting us to practice introspection and ask ourselves if our piety is true or if it is a performance for the benefit of those around us. He is inviting us to look deeper than how many times we genuflect and whether we know all the words to the Eucharistic prayers without looking at the prayer book and consider whether our outward piety is reflective of our inward spirits.

In the words of the Venerable Irene Egmalis-Maniaman, Vicar at St. John the Divine and Archdeacon of the Episcopal Church in Micronesia, “The truth is, it can be easy to hide our broken selves under the many beautiful things that we do. It is possible that we can be doing all the right things, like being active in the community and the church, praying, doing justice, defending peace and the integrity of creation, helping the poor, the immigrants, and the youth, and advocating for the rights of those most in danger of losing them. The good works that we do sometimes serve as a smokescreen to make us look good and busy and feel great about ourselves!” Throughout this parable, Christ invites us to dig deep within ourselves, down to the center of who we are so that we can see that once the facade of righteousness is removed, we are all the sinners. We must ask ourselves *why* we do the work that we do. Do we do it for ourselves, to make ourselves look like model Christians? Or do we do it out of an earnest desire to give of ourselves in service to God and neighbor?

What my siblings and I didn’t know when we were kids is that we didn’t *need* to tell our dad about all the good things we did; he already knew them. We spent so much time comparing ourselves and trying to one-up each other’s goodness that we failed to see the point in the goodness at all, we just wanted the attention and accolades from having done what we were supposed to do. Adults do this too, often in more subtle ways. We often think of our way as being the only “right” way and any other way is wrong. Even communities can be guilty of this! Episcopalians love to remind people that we are the progressive Christians and welcome everyone in our Church, and when we do that we are comparing ourselves to other denominations and creating an “us” versus “them.” Just like my siblings and me with our dad, perhaps we fall into this cycle of comparison in an attempt to prove ourselves to God and each other because deep down, we are afraid that we aren’t good enough.

This parable invites us to be totally honest with ourselves just as the tax collector was. We *aren’t* perfect; we are broken and in need of healing, sinners in need of saving, just as the tax collector was. When we stand before God with searing honesty and true repentance for the wrongs we have done, we can begin to break the chains of division that bind us so tightly to our sin, for as the gospel said, all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Earlier in Luke Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners for repentance.” The Pharisee in the parable thought he was perfectly righteous and so good that he went in and out of the temple without repentance and a change of heart. In his mind, he already had a crown of righteousness and so he saw no need for self-examination. He believed that he was doing everything right and was good to go, but in order to gain the crown of righteousness we must first acknowledge our own sin and begin to repent.

It can be uncomfortable to examine ourselves and take a close look at our own sin, but there is nothing to fear from it; it’s like our psalm today said, “When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.” There is nothing you have to hide from yourself, and there is

nothing you have to hide from God; God already knows it. Like the tax collector in the parable, we can stand before God confident in the knowledge that if we say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” that God will be merciful. Each and every one of us is beloved of God, and God is eager to forgive. In a few minutes, we will together confess that we are sinners and ask God to forgive us for what we have done and what we have left undone, and we will say that we are truly sorry and we humbly repent. Because of the cross and resurrection, we are forgiven, and Mother Leyla will remind us of that when she pronounces the absolution. We can go home today confident in the knowledge that we are a people forgiven, healed, and renewed by the grace of God and with the strength to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.