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Pentecost 22

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“An Honest Self-Evaluation”

Text: Luke 18:9-17 (Genesis 4:1-15)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, a professor of mine at school sent out a self-evaluation questionnaire for one of the classes I'm taking. He wanted us to analyze how we thought we were doing with the readings, and preparing questions for the class, and in the class discussion, and said he would use our responses to help him determine the class participation part of our grade.

Now, *how do you do this?* On the one hand, you want to be honest, but you don't want to be so honest that your grade suffers. On the other hand, you want a good grade, so how can you make yourself look good, yet without just writing down all that you know the professor wants to hear? And then, how will he read them? Will he mark me down if he thinks I am overstating my case? But if I'm honest, will he also mark me down? *What do you do?*

And then, how are the others in the class are going to answer. What are they going to say? Will I look good compared to them, or bad? Are *they* going to be honest? . . . How do you evaluate yourself?

Well, today's Gospel shows us two examples of self-evaluation - two extremes, we might say. The Pharisee, who wrote down only good stuff, and the tax collector, who wrote down only bad stuff. But for no mere professor or grade is this self-evaluation, but before the God of the universe. The one who is coming again to judge both the living and the dead. So, *better get this one right!*

Now, to be honest, the Pharisee is a pretty good guy. He fasts *twice* a week, when the norm was once a week. And he did so not only to fast for his own sins, but also for the sins of others, to help out those who weren't as good and holy as he was. Well, that's not bad, is it? . . . And he acts similarly with the tithe. The Law required the tithe of all one's produce or income, but many farmers or traders did not do this. So to make up for that, the Pharisee not only paid the tithe of his income, he also paid the tithe for all that he got, that he bought in the market, for those who did not, so that God would not be robbed. That cost him a lot. He was doing his best to try and please God. And that's not bad, is it?

Now at this point (you're probably thinking to yourself, as a good Lutheran), that it wasn't the Pharisee's good works that were the problem, but the fact that he was depending on his works before God, and we know it's not about good works. They don't count. It's about faith. Faith counts! Right?

Ah, as one of my seminary professor used to say, that's the way of it with lazy Lutherans. To drive a wedge between faith and good works. To look around in the world and see people doing lots of good things - helping in the community, doing missions at home and abroad, praying, fasting, tithing, serving - and then excuse our inactivity, our laziness, our coldness, by saying: *"Yes, but we have faith. We have the pure teaching. We know how to rightly divide Law and Gospel. We are justified by faith and not by works."* Or (to translate that into other words): Thank you, God, that you have not made me like these others: like the Roman Catholics who think they have to do these things to be saved; or like those *other* Lutherans and Anglicans who are making such a mess of sexuality; or like those Pentecostals who do and believe all kinds of crazy things. Yes, how good we are at pointing out the problems and errors of others . . . and exalting ourselves in our self-evaluation, just like the Pharisee.

Now, let me be clear: it is most certainly true that we are saved by grace through faith alone. That our good works do not *merit* us anything before God. Absolutely true. But that does not make them optional or unimportant. Or as Dr. Luther would say: *while we're saved by faith alone, faith is never alone.* For while faith is not optional, neither are good works. Faith in our relationship with God, good works in our relationships with each other. Faith for salvation, good works for the living out of that salvation. The Pharisee erred on the side of good works without faith, but do we err on the other side? Of faith without good works?

Perhaps one example of this. Someone once told me: *where we are the most proud, there is where we fall the most short.* It's an odd sort of paradox, when you think about it, but one that I've found quite true. So if we Lutherans are most proud of our justification by grace through faith, how do we here fall short? Perhaps it is in this: that while quick to repent here to God, we are slow to repent to one another. And while quick to receive forgiveness here, we are slow to forgive one another. The words: *"Please forgive me"* and *"I forgive you"* should be the most ready in our hearts, the most eager in our mouths, and always right on the tips of our tongues. So why are they so often the words we are so slow to say? So reluctant to say? So loathe to say? Dear brother and sister Pharisees, it should not be.

But there was another one there in the Temple that day. He knew his faith wasn't good enough. He knew his life wasn't good enough. He knew his prayers weren't good enough. He knew his clothes, his actions, his gestures, his words weren't

good enough. Nothing was. His self-evaluation: he was a sinner. Mercy was his only hope. He deserved nothing. And so he cried to God, simply blurting out the truth: **God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**

This is how it is with us before God. With the God who said, “*Be holy*” (Lev 19:2). He did not say: try your best; not: be better than others, in the top half. He said, *Be holy*. And He meant it. And we aren’t; not in the least bit the way He is. And when we compare ourselves with others - in the way of Cain looking down on Abel, or the Pharisee looking down on others - we are not in the way of holiness, the way of mercy; but in the way of self-justification. But when you stand before God, it is not with others, for comparison, but alone, for judgment. Then there is no *but what about him?* Then there is only how you have fallen short.

That is the desperation of the tax collector, who knew there were no deals to make, no excuses to give. His sin meant the end of him. And it is the end of us. When you confess your sin here, there is no deal being made - that we do this and God will do that. That our confession is our half of the deal, and God’s forgiveness is the other half. No. What happens here is all of God. Our confession is our self-condemnation; our truthful self-evaluation that we deserve nothing but hell and are in desperate straits. And God would be right to agree with our self-evaluation and give us what we deserve.

But then we hear that most wonderful of sentences: that this desperate tax collector, who had nothing going for him at all, **went down to his house justified**. He received mercy from the God of mercy. The Pharisee did not come looking for anything from God, and so left with nothing from God. He thought he had all that he needed, and so left with nothing but his high opinion of himself and his self-justification. But the tax collector left with much, much more, for he left forgiven; he left mercied; he left justified by God.

For the truth is, if you’re trying to climb up to God with your good works and accomplishments - or even with your faith and devotion, like the Pharisee - you’re going the wrong way. For God is not up. God came down. Down to us. Down to our depths. Down to the tax collectors and sinners. To give. To give Himself. To give His life. And so the Son of God humbles Himself to be born a man, to be hung up on the cross, to be condemned as the sinner for sinners. To join us in our desperation, give hope to the hopeless, and mercy all who deserve nothing. And so it is not in the glory of our own holiness, but in the depth of our sin, that we find a merciful and forgiving God. Who has come not to approve of or excuse our sin, but to wash us clean of our sin and renew a right spirit within us. His Spirit. That we go to our houses forgiven, mercied, justified, to live what we have received. To forgiven as we have been forgiven. To mercy as we have been mercied.

Some people think we should feel comfortable and at home coming to church. I'm not so sure. Perhaps those who are uncomfortable have it right. Like the tax collector. For here we are stuck between two worlds, as mortal men coming before the immortal God. With one foot on earth and one foot in heaven, one foot in sin and one foot in holiness, one foot in the grave and one foot in life. *Should* that be a "comfortable" place to be? . . . But here's the good news: to be in such a way is to be in Christ. In the One who in mercy came and bridged the gap in His own body between God and man, between heaven and hell, between life and death, for us and for our salvation. It is to be in the One who came in mercy, to mercy.

And so while you may not be comfortable confessing your sin and filling out your self-evaluation in such an honest way, falling on your face and knees in desperation, your mouth opened in confession is filled with the Body and Blood of Christ, the Body and Blood of the Merciful One, the Body and Blood of forgiveness. Your humiliation is met with His exaltation. Your condemnation is met with His mercy. *And you, too, go to your house justified.* For when you are nothing, then what happens is all God. All cross, all gift, all grace. Jesus in the water, Jesus on the altar, Jesus for you. Jesus taking tax collectors and sinners and creating children of faith. Children, ***for to such belongs the kingdom of God.***

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.