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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
October 23, 2022
Pentecost 20

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today's vocabulary word is "sanctimonious."

Sanctimonious. And at first hearing, one would think that this word "sanctimonious" would fit quite well into worship, and all the things we discuss here in church.

Indeed, sanctimonious shares the same root with words like "sanctify" and "sanctuary."

That Latin root *sanctus* after all means "holy."

Yes, today's vocabulary word is "sanctimonious."

And, "sanctimonious" is one of those 50 cent words.

"Sanctimonious" is a word that one might see, say, on the college SATs, along with words like ephemeral, and phlegmatic, and diaphanous.

To be sure, the word "sanctimonious" is great to know when taking the SATs or when writing an academic paper, but we probably don't hear a lot of people using the word "sanctimonious" in everyday conversation.

In fact, I can't remember a time when someone said to me, "Do you believe that person? How he acts! How sanctimonious!"

But, again, "sanctimonious" is the word for today.

It is the word that sums up today's gospel reading.

And if we weren't aware, "sanctimonious" means to be self-righteous, so we can see where the sense of "holiness," or "righteousness," comes into play with regards to the word and its Latin root, *sanctus*.

Sanctimonious means to be self-righteous, or even better, it means to think of one's self as "holier-than-thou."

Sanctimonious means to think of one's self a morally superior to others.

And this is exactly what we see in our gospel reading, isn't it?

Jesus tells a parable about two men who go to the temple to pray.

And the one man prays, saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers."

This man is self-righteous.

This man thinks of himself as holier-than-thou. He thinks himself morally superior.

This man is displaying all the attributes of being sanctimonious.

"Look how good I am," the man goes on.

"I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

This man is a "little goody-two shoes;" this man is a "brown-noser;" he is a "suck-up," to use more contemporary jargon.

"Look how good I am," says the man.

PAUSE

Now this gospel reading begins by noting that Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

And in that description we see a couple of things.

First, Jesus is wont to say that people are trusting in themselves, to the exclusion of God.

When people are self-righteous, they turn away from God, they have no need of God, they don't feel the need to trust in God.

It is in the word itself—self-righteous, trusting in one's own ability to make one's self-righteous, whereby failing to trust in God to make one righteous.

So that is the first thing, to be self-righteous, to be sanctimonious is to trust in one's self, it is to elevate one's self above God.

And the second thing we notice is that to be sanctimonious is to elevate one's self above others, to regard others with contempt.

And, this is the part in which I believe we are all guilty, maybe not all the time, but certainly, some of the time.

This is the part where we are to think about how we speak negatively about others.

This is the part where we are to think about how we cast ourselves as not like those other people.

This is the part where we are to think about how we engage in rumor-mongering: "Did you hear about so and so? Can you believe how some people behave?"

This is the part where we put ourselves in the position of Pharisee, "Look how good I am."

This text reads us too well, doesn't it?

Jesus our Lord knows us too well, doesn't he?

For who among us, does not participate in this little sin of belittling our neighbor, so as to make ourselves look good.

"I've got some juicy gossip about so and so. You're gonna want to hear this."

This is the stuff of newspaper tabloids.

This is the stuff of Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood and other television programs.

There, for example, is the ongoing story surrounding the relationship of Tom Brady and Gisele Bundchen, and there are all sorts of speculations and theories about what is going on there.

There is the recent story about Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots, marrying Dana Blumberg a week ago Friday, and there are all sorts of gossip swirling around them.

And then we have been hearing stories about Herschel Walker, and we are continue to hear about Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, and so on and so on.

And to some extent, I have to believe that we like to talk about and hear about all these other people, and think of ourselves as somehow better than all these other people, because when we talk about other people we don't need to take a hard look at ourselves.

When we talk about other people, not just celebrities...

When we talk about our neighbors, or our colleagues at work, or our family members...

When we talk about other people, it is easy to divert our attention away from our shortcomings and our personal failings.

PAUSE

Of course, what we are talking about here...

What we are getting at here is "relationship."

For what kind of relationship do we truly have with ourselves if don't take hard look at our own lives?

If we don't recognize our shortcomings and personal failings, how can we ever improve our lives, how can we ever heal our lives?

AND it is not just about the relationship we have with ourselves.

No, if we believe that we are somehow better than other people, if we get into the habit of seeing others as more immoral than we are, as more flawed than we are, well then we can become easily jaded in our assessment of humanity as a whole.

To see everyone else, or at least a great many around us as inferior to ourselves, to see others who don't share our political views, or who don't share our opinion on issues, as enemies...

To discredit all those in the populace who aren't like us, can soon make us cynical of humanity in general.

And so then, what hope is there for relationships between us and other people?

Yes, this parable is all about relationship, or should we say the broken relationship between two people—a Pharisee and a tax collector.

Thank God, the Pharisee says, thank God I am not like this tax collector.

With such words, how can relationship ever hope to be restored?

Thank God, I am not like that Republican Donald Trump, or that Republican Emmet Oz, or that Republican Doug Mastriano.

Thank God, I am not like that Democrat Joe Biden, or that Democrat John Fetterman, or that Democrat Josh Shapiro.

Thank God, I am not like those Conservatives. Thank God, I am not like those Liberals.

Thank God, I am not like those... fill in the blank in any category you choose— political ideology, religious affiliation, racial makeup, ethnicity, any category you want.

We as people love to define ourselves by that which we are not, and not as what we are.

And this then affects our relationship not just with respect to other people.

No, this also affects our relationship with God.

I am better than those people, because look at all I do, and say, and am.

And this leads to arrogance, this leads to self-righteousness, this leads to trusting solely in one's self, and thus turning away from God.

We define ourselves as people more often by who we are not, than by who we are.

Yes, this gospel text is reading us. Jesus our Lord is reading us.

PAUSE

“So why then is church is so important?” you might wonder, Friends.

Why is coming to worship on Sunday necessary still in this day of science and technology?

What place does religion have in the world, when we live in an age of Enlightenment?

Worship, and Church, and Religion are important, if for no other reason than to remind the human species of humility.

Humanity as a whole needs to embrace humility.

And religion first and foremost recalls to mind the necessity of humility.

We come to worship and we stand before a power greater than ourselves, and that is sobering, that is humbling.

We come to worship and we begin our time together by confessing our sins.

Like the tax collector who comes to the temple in Jerusalem beating his breast...

So humbled is he that he cannot even lift his face up...

So, too, do we come before God in worship and we are humbled.

And we are reminded that we are no better than our neighbor next door, whose is talked about by others.

We are no better than our colleague at work about whom gossip swirls.

We are no better than that family member whom everyone likes to refer to as the bad-egg.

We are no better than those whose names are dragged through the tabloids and whose faces appear on television.

We are no better.

I remind us of Martin Luther's last written words, the words he wrote shortly before he died, which capture this sentiment perfectly—we are no better than any other.

Luther understood that we are all equal standing before God.

He wrote shortly before he died this, "We are all beggars. It is true."

In other words, each of us, every last person is a beggar before God, holding out our hands to receive God's grace. And it is only because God is gracious to any of us that we breathe, and move, and have our being in this world, and have a glimpse of hope in the world to come.

We are all beggars, it is true.

Of this we are reminded in worship each Sunday. Of this we are reminded when we begin worship in confession, longing to hear the word of forgiveness. We are beggars, it is true.

And by this humility only, can we hope to be in relationship with ourselves, with one another, and with God.

Our Lord understands the basis of relationship to be humility, which is why Jesus tells this parable. And this is why the tax collector is lifted up as the example.

The tax collector doesn't say, "Thank God I am not like so and so."

He doesn't define himself by whom he is not.

No, instead the tax collector acknowledges who he is, a sinner, a beggar, as we all are, standing with hands out, hoping to receive God's grace.

PAUSE

And so, Jesus tells us that there is an exaltation that comes with humility.

"Humble yourselves," says our Lord, "and you will be exalted."

And what better "exaltation" is there in this world and in heaven come than to be in relationship with God and with all the saints in the kingdom. That is exaltation.

But relationship all starts with humility, a word much, MUCH better than that word "sanctimonious."

To be exalted, Friends, is to know the fullness of relationship in God's kingdom, to know the fullness of relationship that comes through the grace of humility.

Thanks be to God. Amen.