

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
10/23/16
Pentecost 23
Luke 18:9-14, 2 Timothy 4:6-8; 16-18

We gather here on this Ingathering Sunday to celebrate our lives together in Christian community. In a few moments we'll be invited to bring our pledge cards forward as we come to the altar to share the sacramental meal that our Lord prepares for us each Sunday. And as we place our pledge cards in the baskets the acolytes will be holding, we'll be reminded that our commitment of our financial resources to the work we're doing here at St. Thomas is a sacrament itself. Our pledges to the ministry done in Jesus' name here at St. Thomas really are "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" as the Prayer Book defines a sacrament. And in this sacramental sharing of money and a meal, we are celebrating community. And a particular kind of community. A Christian community.

I, for one, am extraordinarily grateful for this Christian community. You have inspired me with your commitment to service. You have inspired me with your compassion for those less fortunate than ourselves. You have inspired me with your thirst for learning and study of the Bible. You have inspired me with your support of experiences for our children and youth of what it means to grow in love and service of the Lord Jesus. And in this last year as a cancer diagnosis has called me to confront my own mortality, you have held me up and loved me unconditionally when I well might have fallen down.

St. Thomas is my home and my gratitude for this Christian community is deep. Zonnie joins me in this gratitude, of course. She has said many times that St. Thomas would be her spiritual home even if I didn't work here. So our gratitude for this place calls from us a response, in fact, many responses. But today our response is gratitude. It's being reflected in the pledge card that we will place in one of these baskets in just a moment. Our pledge, as it does every year, represents an increase over last year's pledge. Our income hasn't increased. In fact, as Zonnie continues to let go of her legal work, our income this year has gone down. Nevertheless, we're increasing our pledge. Why? Gratitude. Gratitude for this Christian community where we have known the love of the Lord Jesus Christ in the hands and faces of so many of you. Gratitude for our Christian home.

As I've reflected on the parable we hear Jesus telling this morning, it's occurred to me that it is in many respects, a parable about life in community like St. Thomas. We

usually view the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector as being about the Pharisee's pride and arrogance and the tax collector's humility. We are very quick to judge and condemn the Pharisee and praise the tax collector. But that really just substitutes our own judgmental condemnation for that of the Pharisee's. And, really, does that observation change us at all?

Does it provide any insights? Does it move us to new behavior? Probably not. So I'm quite sure that Jesus had something different in mind here. You know, his audience of the 1st century Jews would not have seen these two characters as we do, with the Pharisee wearing the black hat and the tax collector, the white hat. On the contrary, Jesus' audience would have viewed the tax collector with great suspicion and skepticism. After all, he was an agent of the occupying Empire. He represented the forces of oppression and financial slavery. And he was probably dishonest to boot. Tax collectors added their own cut of the proceeds they were collecting as their fee, if you will. They were resented and considered to be traitors. The Pharisee, on the other hand, was an admired figure. A figure of rectitude and righteousness. The Pharisees not only were interpreters of the Holy Law, most of them sought to live out the Law in their own lives. They sought to be good. So there's the frame through which Jesus' audiences sees these two characters. Different from ours, isn't it? Now let's look at what they do. "Two men went up to the Temple to pray." Two men who couldn't have been more different, yet they share a common goal. To offer prayer to God. And to offer that prayer, not in private, but in the Temple, the place where the community gathers to pray.

The Pharisee begins his prayer by checking off all the right boxes. He's not a thief or a rogue or an adulterer, or God forbid, a tax collector. He fasts twice a week and tithes a tenth of his income. In other words, he is a good and righteous man who works hard to obey the Law. In contrast, the tax collector is clearly aware that he is not a good and righteous man. He has not followed the Law. And his guilt and remorse are crushing him, And so he acknowledges his sin before God and throws himself on God's mercy. And Jesus says that he is the one who will go home justified, which is to say, right with God.

There's the kicker, the punch, in the parable, for Jesus' audience. It's not the dutiful, the righteous, the well behaved Pharisee who is justified. It's the one who admits he **isn't** dutiful and righteous and well behaved and who pleads for God's mercy, that his life might be changed, who goes home right with God. Jesus' audience must have been astonished. And here's another astonishing take away from this parable. There is learning and insight and transformation for **both** of these men. For the tax collector, having received God's mercy, he will become more like the righteous Pharisee, a follower of the Law, the Law which, after all, was given to the people by God. He will try to do good. And the Pharisee will become more like the humble tax collector. He will recognize that

simply checking off all the boxes isn't good enough. He can follow every jot and tittle of the Law, but if his heart isn't humbled, if he doesn't recognize his need for God's mercy and grace, all his rule following will be in vain. They learn from each other. They teach each other. They need each other. And where does this all happen? In the Temple. Which is to say, in community.

I don't know about you, but there are times when I'm the Pharisee, the dutiful rule follower, trying to do it all on my own. And then there are times, no doubt fewer, when I'm acutely aware of my brokenness, my need for God's mercy and grace. And thanks be to God, I have a community where all these parts of myself can be held and transformed. That's why I need this community. I need to be in a place where God's love is being witnessed to and acted out every single day. I need to be in a community where I can know God's mercy and grace in spite of my brokenness and my failings.

We need each other, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ. We need each other as surely as the Pharisee and the tax collector needed each other. And we need to be here together in this place, in this community, where the love and the grace and the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ can be at work in each of our lives.

Do we need to pay the light bill and the water bill at St. Thomas? Yes. Do we need to maintain these beautiful buildings and grounds? Sure. Do we need to pay our staff an appropriate living wage commensurate with their abilities and their dedication to their ministries here? I think so. All that's important. But here's something even more important. I'm giving to this community, because I need this place. I need to be here with you knowing and sharing Jesus' love and mercy. I need that like I need sunshine. And if you're here today, my guess is that you know you need this place too. We **need** each other. We **need** this community.

So when you're completing your pledge card, let it reflect your gratitude for God drawing you here to this blessed place. Let your pledge card reflect your gratitude for calling you into a community where you can be yourself, a person who is trying to do good, who wants to do good and a person who also knows your need for mercy. Let your pledge be an offering of thanks to God for all the blessings and all the challenges of this life. Amen.