

**COMPARATIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 23C (Proper 25) –Lk 18:9-14*  
LPC, 10/23/16

Did you notice that there was a televised debate last week? Who do you think won? The corrupt, dishonest political tool or the arrogant, willfully ignorant sexist?

Actually I am not going to preach a sermon about politics. I am going to preach a sermon about theology and Christian ethics based on scripture. Much of scriptural theology and Christian ethics, if you haven't noticed, is about sin.

All human beings (except one), according to Christian theology, are sinners. For the sake of this sermon, those two debaters are simply the most public of sinners. It is not even my intention to talk about them, but to talk about *us*, those of us who witness and react to the presidential debates, and about a phenomenon I will call "comparative righteousness," which I think is the subject of today's Gospel reading from Luke.

Comparative righteousness starts from a place of relative sophistication, ethically speaking. A person recognizes his or her moral and religious responsibilities and takes them very seriously. But the person feels the need for some gauge of how she or he is doing. The person hits upon the device of comparing himself or herself to how other people appear to be doing. The beauty of this is that you can always find someone worse than yourself, which makes you feel better, at least superficially.

However, this is where sin comes in. When we compare our righteousness to others the frame of reference shifts from pleasing God to outdoing other people. The person self-congratulates for any virtue, spiritual gift, or moral accomplishment.

Even when personal sin is recognized, the person can always find someone worse. "Well, I may have unkind thoughts, but I'm no murderer." "I may let slip a racial stereotype once in a while, but I'm no Adolph Hitler." "I may be bad on my diet but I'm not as fat as she is." "I may enjoy getting high but I'm not an addict like those derelicts downtown."

Please note what is happening here. The focus becomes self-justification. And no matter how good you are, you can't justify yourself. Justification comes from God alone.

In the parable that Jesus tells, the Pharisee is indulging in comparative righteousness. Now, please understand that the Pharisee really is a person who behaves righteously. One of my clergy colleagues said that most of us would love to have our pews filled with this kind of person, who is abstemious and gives a tenth of his income to charity.

The Pharisees were people dismayed by the moral and religious laxity of most Jews, and were determined to be as religiously observant as possible, fulfilling every jot and tittle of the law. There are many Christians today who feel the same way. They are dismayed by the moral and religious laxity of mainstream Christianity and are determined to be seriously Christian. They genuinely keep the Ten Commandments, and want them posted everywhere.

Don't get me wrong. I am not condemning moral rectitude and traditional teaching, and neither was Jesus. What Jesus condemned was comparative righteousness, because comparative righteousness kills the compassion and love that Jesus really saw as the foundation of all moral and religious teaching.

We see this in the Pharisee, to whom the tax collector was his clear moral inferior and therefore worthy of being dismissed.

If you don't know this, tax collectors were the lowest of the low in conventional Jewish circles in Jesus' day. They were collaborators with the godless Roman oppressors. They not only flouted Jewish law by associating closely with unclean Gentiles, but they participated in the exploitation of their fellow Jews. They were despised in the same way that, during the days of American slavery, a black overseer was despised by his fellow slaves. The tax collectors had sold out. They were traitors to their own kind. They were easy targets for comparative righteousness.

I was trying to think of what kind of easily identifiable person might excite the same kind of contempt or disregard in us today. If you're union, it would be a scab. If you're Christian it might be a Muslim. If you're a documented citizen it might be an illegal alien. If you're a republican it would be a democrat, or vice versa.

However to indulge in comparative righteousness we don't even have to despise anyone. We just have to deem ourselves morally superior to the other person. As long as this is true, our focus is on ourselves, and not on God.

When our focus is on ourselves, the compassion and love taught by our Lord can't help but suffer. When our focus is on ourselves it is easy to depersonalize other people and regard them with contempt.

When we indulge in comparative righteousness, we too easily excuse our own petty sins, reasoning that they pale next to the extravagant sins of celebrities and notorious criminals. The fact is that even petty sins distance us from God. That's why they're called sins.

We may not be as arrogant, corrupt, sexist, willfully ignorant or tolerant of an unjust system as either presidential candidate. But that doesn't mean we can ignore those tendencies in ourselves.

Here's the good news. The tax collector, we are told, returned to his home justified. Justification comes from God alone. The justification we give ourselves is not ultimately worth very much, but God's justification means freedom from our sins, great and small. God always hears the prayer of sincere repentance and self-dedication. God sees us as we really are, and still loves and forgives.