

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 23, 2022

JEREMIAH 14:7-10, 19-22 | PSALM 84:1-7 | 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8, 16-18 | LUKE 18:9-14

I want to start today by asking a very simple question: why do we read scripture during worship?

You've probably noticed that there are some things we don't do during worship sometimes. Sometimes we'll do evening prayer and not celebrate communion. Sometimes we'll omit the creed. Sometimes we'll do thanksgiving for baptism instead of confession and forgiveness. But every time we gather for worship, we read scripture together. Why is that?

There is a "textbook" answer to this question. If you're keeping score, this is Principal 5 of "The Use and Means of Grace." It says that through the proclamation of the written Word of God, "God gives faith, forgiveness of sins, and new life." In other words, we read scripture because it tells us what God is doing in the world and in our lives.

Why does this matter? Well, it matters because when we hear a story like today's gospel reading, a parable that is primarily about people, there's a temptation to begin by focusing not on what God is doing in the world and in our lives but with which people in the story we identify with.

For example, you could imagine reading this story and focusing on how although the Pharisee in the story is a generous person, but he also comes off as a bit arrogant. He really needs to get put in his place. And maybe you even know some people like this Pharisee who would really benefit from being in church today and hearing this parable. (Please keep any names to yourself.) On the other hand, the tax collector might not be quite as honorable, but he seems to have a decent handle on his shortcomings. You might think to yourself, *That tax collector reminds me of myself. Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee.* You can see the problem.

The parable looks different when you start not with the two people in it but with what God is doing. There are a bunch of obvious differences between these two men. But pay attention to something more subtle. Notice the difference in how these two men address God. The Pharisee in the story addresses God as an object. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." The Pharisee speaks as if God isn't really involved in his life but might be interested in how it's going. And so the Pharisee talks as if he's leaving a message on God's voicemail.

In the academic literature, sometimes you'll see the Pharisee's beliefs described as moralistic therapeutic deism.¹ It's moralistic because it's about behavior. "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." It's therapeutic because it's all about feeling good about yourself. Clearly this Pharisee appears to feel very good about himself. And it's deism because it assumes that God did something important in the past, but now God just sort of checks in on things from time to time.

We have a special word we use for this in confirmation. Not moralistic therapeutic deism. But just "up religion." (And I know I've done this homily before, but it's been sixteen

¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 14. The basic points of TMD are 1) a god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth, 2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions, 3) the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself, 4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem, and 5) good people go to heaven when they die.

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months, so we're do for a review.) Up religion says that to be fully in relationship with God you need to behave a certain way, achieve a certain religiosity, hold certain beliefs, and be a certain kind of person. You need to fast twice a week. You need to give away a certain percent of your income. You need to do a certain activity. If you take the right steps, then you can really be the person God created you to be.

But what's the problem with up religion? Well, you never really get high enough. You fast twice a week and then you start thinking, *Well, if two is good, three must be better.* You give away a tenth of your income and then you start wondering, "Well, maybe if I gave eleven percent, God would really like that." And because we're afraid we're not getting "up" to God, we start punching down. Or at least what we think of as down. And sure enough, the Pharisee in the story can't talk about his own faithfulness without putting down other people. *Well, maybe I'm not perfect, but at least I'm a lot better than those people.*

And when you hear the parable that way, this Pharisee doesn't sound like someone who is grateful for what God has entrusted to him. He sounds like someone who is deeply insecure, anxious, and afraid.

But notice how the tax collector addresses God. *God, be merciful to me.* Be merciful. Now usually, this is the part of the homily where I give you some Greek word and explain why the translation we have doesn't really capture the meaning. But not today. What matters here is the mood. The tax collector talks to God using the imperative mood. He is asking God to *do* something. The tax collector might be messing up quite a bit, he might not be a model of virtue, but he believes that God is actively calling and empowering him to love and serve his neighbors. He believes that God is involved.

The tax collector practices what we call "Down religion." Down religion means that instead of us trying to get to God by fasting more or praying more or doing more, God comes to us. That God is already involved. After all, if the tax collector didn't think God was involved, why bother asking God to do something?

The tax collector's trust that God is acting in the world is the difference between these two men. It has nothing to do with how much they give or steal. It has nothing to do with how much they fast or don't fast. It has nothing to do with humility. Everything else in the parable is downstream from how these two men talk about God.

And it's the same for us. Down religion is the center of everything we do here not because it's some agenda I have, but because it is at the core of who we believe God is. Not an absentee landlord. Not a distant parent. Not a goal to aspire to. But the living Word that meets us here and sustains us along the way.

So which character are we? Probably both. Sometimes we fall back into using up religion because it's convenient. But when we do that, it leaves us feeling anxious and resentful. We reduce our lives down to resumes and wonder why we never feel satisfied. We make our church into a social club that needs more members and wonder why people aren't interested in that. We make our neighbors into competitors in a zero-sum game and wonder why everyone seems so tense all the time. We end up like the Pharisee, projecting confidence and gratitude but only as a way to cover up our insecurity and fear.

But "Down Religion" changes everything. When we trust that God is actively involved creating and sustaining our lives, it leaves us feeling empowered and purposeful.

We see our own lives full to the brim with the many and various ways that we serve through our vocations. We see our church as a gift of God that enriches and sustains our common life. We see our neighbors as the means by which God's grace is brought into the world.

What matters is not which character in the story we believe ourselves to be but who we believe God to be. And what we hear about God every time we gather around the sacraments, every week when we are sent out in mission, and—just to bring this full circle—whenever we read scripture together is that God is already involved in our lives, the lives of our neighbors, and the life of our creation.

So today and every day, we thank God not because we're not like others, but because through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is making us more like Jesus Christ.

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