

Introductory

The first part of this pericope is exclusive to Luke. The appointed gospel reading for Trinity 11 in TLH and Pentecost 23C in LW is Luke 18:9-14. We note that LSB has added to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican the incident of people bringing little children to Jesus. That incident finds parallels in Matthew 19:13 -15 and Mark 10:13-16.

In case you are wondering why I start here every week, with both lectionaries, it's so that you can look at past sermons and start there. Past sermons probably have some good stuff in them, and you can throw away some of it and improve on that good stuff. If you are transitioning from the one-year to the three-year, a lot of those sermons will be useful.

Jesus often re-uses and sometimes modifies material. But don't just pull that sermon out of the file and preach it. Pull it out of the file and improve it, usually by writing an entirely new and fresh sermon, taking parts and ideas from the old. You can also draw from sermons of other people, but the best sermon is going to be written by the preacher.

If there is a flow or connection between last week's parable and this week's, it would be in the matter of prayer, which is a crucial component of both pericopes. At first glance it appears that Jesus just decides to take on the Pharisees by telling a parable that has one of them as the main character, one who ends up looking bad, but context always matters.

His audience is different from what it was last week, and upon further examination it is the drastically different prayers of the two men that form the main idea and make the point of the parable. That section, which ends with the "humbled – exalted" saying, makes for a smooth transition into the account of the children, who are the most humble.

Jesus is talking to people who think themselves to be righteous. As is almost always the case, those who think of themselves as being righteous will look down on others. The natural man knows about God and about right and wrong and about heaven and hell. It is because of his knowledge of these things that the natural man is naturally religious.

It's another one of the increasing number of things of which I am aware that separate the humans from the rest of God's creation. I have never once seen any of my dogs pray, and the birds gather to build nests, but not altars. Nor does the dog think about being righteous or not, and in fact no such concept exists for the dog or for any other animal.

Knowing these things, and not knowing of Justification by Faith, there will always be a desire in the natural man to see himself as being good enough to get to heaven. He will often see his spiritual and moral life in terms of comparison to and even competing with

other humans. While most people will admit that they aren't perfect, they also believe they are better than most other people, so they "look down on everybody else."

Christians will also often compete in this way, noting that they may be sinners but they're not as bad as most other people. If they think about that too much or put too much stock in it, they may become Pharisees themselves. If the pastor spends a lot of time talking about how bad those sinners are out there, then he may be contributing to this problem.

If it so happens that a pastor looks out on Sunday morning and sees a bunch of Pharisees, he can always blame his predecessor. If not, then maybe he should look into the mirror. Hammering people with the Law, absent of the Gospel, leaves people only two choices; stop coming to church, or keep coming and become a Pharisee, and I've seen it happen.

The Pharisee in this parable, like Christians these days who fashion themselves to be "spiritual," should have known better. He would have been a theologian, well-versed in the OT, and he should have known that he too was a sinner. If he were going to daily Temple, he would have had to confess his sins every time he turned over a sacrifice.

The addition in the LSB three-year series of little children being brought to Jesus is a good add. It flows from the "humbled – exalted" oxymoron at the end of the parable. Apparently, the point of the parable went completely over the heads of the disciples of Jesus (Christians), because they effort to keep the humblest of the humble from Jesus.

Any Sunday is a good Sunday to talk about Baptism, and this Sunday would be a great one to talk about the Baptism of babies. We bring our babies to meet Jesus in Baptism like those in this text were bringing their babies to meet Jesus. The callous refusal to let babies receive the gifts that God offers in Baptism must be rebuked in no uncertain terms.

You know how the Lutheran Confessions talk about the "Anabaptists?" Those people are still around, and we call them Baptists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals – basically most of the Reformed don't get too excited about the efficacy of Infant Baptism, and many of them absolutely refuse to baptize them before the age – whatever. We need to call them out.

I was taught not to talk about other churches and their beliefs. I know that my Lutheran (LCMS) Pastor when I was growing up spoke highly of the Baptists – "they know their Bibles better than we do" – but never spoke of their heresy. Jesus, Paul, the Lutherans, and all faithful preachers have always called out false doctrine, and so should we.

Textual Notes

9. When you tell a story, you don't tell that story in a vacuum. The best stories, especially the ones told to teach a lesson, are told in a context, and in this case the context is the people to whom it's directed, "Εἶπεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τινὰς τοὺς πεποιθότας ἐφ' ἑαυτοῖς ὅτι εἰσὶν δίκαιοι – He spoke to certain persuaded in themselves that they are righteous."

The first verb has connotations of confidence, and the translations that use the word “trust” are not wrong, but they do miss the point. The verb is in the form of a perfect active participle, meaning that these are people who are continually assuring self that self is indeed and in fact among the ranks of the righteous. You know people like this.

You’ve heard of the “Nones.” It comes from the answer to the survey question about religions affiliation. Americans are going to church less, and more are thinking of selves as spiritual. They often mimic Christian good works, except when it comes to sexual morality, and make up their own set of commandments, which they follow pretty closely.

The knowledge of Original Sin is written on the heart of every human, and you have to wonder how such a thing can come to pass. That natural knowledge is subjected to a constant barrage of assurances that you are, indeed, okay. Whatever you think, whatever you say, whatever you do, it’s all okay – they have been told – and they *are* buying it.

And some of them become Pastors.

The other shoe drops, “ἐξουθενοῦντας τοὺς λοιποὺς – despising the rest.” I have seen those people, and I have observed that in every case what Luke says is true. The verb “ἐξουθενέω – to have contempt” occurs only eleven times in the NT, and its meaning goes beyond mere hatred, and it’s another participle; this is a way of life for those people.

The word “despised” is also good. In the vernacular, it’s one thing to hate something or somebody, but to despise that thing or body is to take it to another level. It’s the feeling especially had by today’s self-righteous, spiritual Nones have for people like me, and they hold me in contempt mostly for, but not limited to, my beliefs about sexual morality.

I know people like this, and I know of their contempt for me, and they are indeed and by far the most self-righteous I know, rivaled only by some Christian Pietists. But of course Jesus is not here directly speaking to them or the Nones, but to Pharisees, who do have a religious affiliation, who thought of themselves as spiritual, and who were self-righteous.

10. The parable begins with two generic men, who go up to the Temple to pray. One of the men is a Pharisee, and the other is a Publican. Given the location of Jerusalem and Temple, they literally ascend to there to pray. Review as needed what exactly constitutes a Pharisee, and what is a Publican. Actually, I think we’ve transitioned to “tax collector.”

I kind of hammered on this last week, the idea that prayer is fundamentally a corporate activity engaged in by the group in the church on Sunday morning, and secondarily by the family at home and the individual in the car. Some would flip that around, but here again we see two men making the journey to the Temple to offer up their prayers to God.

11. We observe that the Pharisee, who is there and part of the group, is not really a part of the group. Instead “σταθεὶς ταῦτα πρὸς ἑαυτὸν προσήύχετο – standing thus was praying to himself.” Given what the parable is about, it would seem that the man not only thinks himself better and more righteous than the rest, but that he also has contempt for them.

The translations mostly have the man praying “by himself,” but the KJV and descendants rightly have him praying “with himself.” The Berean Literal Bible is even better, having him pray “toward himself.” The pronoun that follows the verb is in the accusative case – see the box in Voelz FGG (2014), p. 31, which has the man actually praying to himself.

If, in fact, the man is praying to himself, and he addresses his prayer to “God,” then that would have him praying to himself as if he himself were God. The thing about self-righteous people, who have contempt for everybody else, is that they become their own moral compass, accountable and answerable only to self, which sounds a lot like God.

His prayer is a prayer of thanks, “ὅτι οὐκ εἰμι ὥσπερ οἱ λοιποὶ – that I am not like the rest” of us. He singles out several things that he is not; “ἄρπαγες, ἄδικοι, μοιχοί – swindler, unrighteous, adulterer.” The first thing he’s not is a person who cheats other people. That rather rare adjective “ἄρπαξ – ravenous” occurs only five times in the NT.

I think he’s not saying that he never cheated anybody in business, for example, but he’s saying that he’s not as bad as the rest of them. Such thinking would be in line with his way of thinking whereby he constantly compares himself to other people, and he is the one who consistently comes out on top. I may not be perfect, but they are much worse.

The second thing he’s not is a person who is not righteous. Which is to say that he thinks of himself to be a righteous man, and he’s telling that to his god. That recurring term which is the subject of this pericope – righteous or not – is one’s ability to stand before the Judge as an innocent person who is not guilty of any kind of wrongdoing whatsoever.

Finally, he claims to be faithful in his marriage; he says that he has never committed adultery, and we should believe him. Assuming he’s married, he has – he prays – always been faithful to his wife. He does not use the more general “πορνεία – sexual perversion,” which may leave the door open for relations other than one man-one woman.

Pulpit Commentary (biblehub.com) quotes a prayer from the Talmud,

When Rabbi Nechounia Ben Hakana left his school, he used to say, "I thank thee, O Eternal, my God, for having given me part with those who attend this school instead of running through the shops. I rise early like them, but it is to study the Law, not for futile ends. I take trouble as they do, but I shall be rewarded, and they will not. We run alike, but I for the future life, while they will only arrive at the pit of destruction" (from the treatise 'Berachath').

At the end of the day, most people could say those same things, and say them with a straight face. Lots of people are faithful to their wives, though that number is decreasing even as we speak. Not many people swindle other people, though that number is increasing, and the number of people who think of themselves as “righteous” is legion.

12. So far, the sins of commission that he has avoided, and now on to the sins of omission that he has not not done. Much unlike the rest, he says “νηστεύω δις τοῦ σαββάτου, ἀποδεκατεύω πάντα ὅσα κτῶμαι – I fast twice a week, tithe all that I acquire.” The claim here is not to be an exemplary person, but to have met the minimum requirements.

Barnes says that “The Pharisees are said to have fasted regularly on the second and fifth days of every week in private (biblehub.com).” The verb that speaks to the Tithe, “I acquire,” can mean accumulated wealth or – like here – income. It’s not a one-time 10% flat tax on your assets, but a 10% tax on your income, paid on more than one occasion.

13. Compare the posture of the Pharisee to that of the Publican, who was “μακρόθεν ἐστὼς οὐκ ᾔθελεν οὐδὲ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐπᾶραι εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν – standing far off, not even wanting to lift his eyes into heaven.” The man is in the Temple, but he is keeping his distance from the Pharisee, but I think he could hear the Pharisee talking about him.

The commentators struggle with the meaning of the adverb “μακρόθεν,” which occurs fourteen times in the NT, and it means “far away.” I don’t think it means that the Publican kept his distance from either the Pharisee or the Temple, neither of which quite make sense. It means that the man did not sit in the front but rather took the pew in back.

We note the double negative that follows, emphasizing the distance that this sinner felt between him and Holy God. His posture is furthermore described as eyes not pointed up, towards the heavens, but they seem to be pointed down at the ground, a posture of humility. The Institute in Life Principles says several prayer postures are seen in the OT.

In the Biblical accounts of prayer, many postures are described. Abraham fell upon his face before God. (See Genesis 17:3, 17.) Moses prayed with his hands outstretched. (See Exodus 9:27–29.) King Solomon knelt in prayer. (See I Kings 8:54.) Jesus prayed looking up into heaven. (See Mark 6:41, John 11:41, and 17:1.)

Another Interweb source (challis.com) lists the following postures for prayer: bowing, kneeling, standing, lying prostrate, and hands raised, all recorded in the OT. These different postures all symbolize something, and I’m not quite sure exactly where it came from, but I was taught to pray with folded hands, closed eyes, head down, no distractions.

The man is said to be self-flagellating, which was a favorite activity of a monk named Luther, and that concept is yet another thing lost to the Modern Christian. When’s the last time you struck yourself? Me too. He uses the definite article (the) to refer to self, saying, “Ὁ Θεός, ἰλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ – O God, have mercy on me, the sinner.”

Rather than tell God what a good person he is, and how lucky God is that he came here to present his holiness to God, the man asks only for mercy. Knowing himself, and so knowing that he is a criminal who has broken the law, the guilty Publican throws himself onto the mercy of the court, like we do Sunday mornings at the beginning of the service.

14. The man spoke the Confession, and at first glance it doesn't look like anybody spoke the Absolution, but the words “λέγω ὑμῖν, κατέβη οὗτος δεδικαιωμένος εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ παρ' ἐκείνων – I tell you, this one went down to his house having been justified, rather than the other,” the Pharisee, who had done the opposite of confessing his sins.

The word “δεδικαιωμένος” is the common word for used for righteousness, or justice, or justification, and it is the same word – different tense – used to introduce the parable (v. 9). The perfect tense is used here, meaning that the pronouncement of the man as “righteous” or “justified” happened in the past, with results enduring into the future.

To compare and contrast is a fundamental facet of Logic, the Science of correct thinking, and people do it all the time. The Culture frowns upon such a thing, and we were taught not to talk about other religions, and many don't seem to want us to think at all. Jesus does, here and other places. The inventor of Logic and the brain would have us to think.

Speaking descriptively and explaining the meaning of the parable told to people who “persuaded in themselves that they are righteous,” He compares and contrasts, “ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὑψῶν ἑαυτὸν ταπεινωθήσεται, ὁ δὲ ταπεινῶν ἑαυτὸν ὑψωθήσεται – everyone who is exalting self will be humbled, and (everyone who is) humbling himself will be exalted.”

The two verbs, each used twice in this verse, are antonyms. One of them means raising or lifting up, and the other means dropping or lowering down. Two of the verb forms are present participles – the current state of things – and two of them are in the future tense – a description and a promise of what the future holds for those respective postures.

We need look no further than Jesus Himself, who was humbled and then exalted, and who was lowered into the ground, from when He was risen, and then He ascended into heaven. So likewise the Christian who has followed Jesus in this life will follow Him into death and Resurrection, and the Last Day looks a lot like an ascension for us.

15. Speaking of humble and exalted, persons were “Προσέφερον δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ τὰ βρέφη ἵνα αὐτῶν ἅπτηται – bringing to Him even the infants, so that He should touch them.” Neither do Matthew and Mark name the persons; either it isn't important, or the obvious doesn't need to be said; the person who controls the location of “τὰ βρέφη” is his mother.

As is the case in the American Language – and we've talked about this before – there is in the Greek Language a general word for “children” and other words for children of more specific ages. This (τὰ βρέφη) is the word for a child inside of the womb or just outside of it; these are newborns and infants, and Jesus welcomes and receives them.

Touching and the perception of feeling is one of the five senses given to us – it's what we're talking about in The Creed. The Middle Eastern culture touches more than we do, and we don't really do that much touching, even before The Thing. We used to shake hands more, but not so much as we used to. Especially since The Thing, we avoid it.

In the Bible, God is often said to “touch” things, and in the NT we often find Jesus touching things. Often such touching will take place in conjunction with His healing of a disease, and that one woman wanted only to touch the hem of his garment, not even Him, thinking that by touching she would be healed. Here, they want Jesus to touch the babies.

Some were not in favor of those people bringing those infants to be touched by Jesus, “ιδόντες δὲ οἱ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμων αὐτοῖς – seeing, the disciples rebuked them.” There are several words for “rebuke” in the NT, and this word means that those Christians were really letting those mothers have it, and the imperfect tense means that they kept it up.

16. Luke explains that “Ἰησοῦς προσεκαλέσατο αὐτὰ λέγων – Jesus, having called them to Him, was saying...” Exactly whom is Jesus calling to Himself, and exactly when did He do that? The word is used in the NT when somebody wants to summon another or others, and at the very least Jesus is summoning the mothers with the children to Him.

It is entirely possible that He means also to summon “the disciples,” the general term for Christians, to Himself; this is a very teachable moment. As to the timing, it is possible that the women are bringing the infants because Jesus had summoned them to come to Him, or can the parable be seen as an invitation to bring even lowly infants to Jesus?

Now using the general term now for children – all children, Jesus says “Ἀφετε τὰ παιδιά ἔρχεσθαι πρὸς με καὶ μὴ κωλύετε αὐτά· – Let the children come into me and stop forbidding them.” The first verb is the word generally used for letting down fishing nets and forgiving sins, and the last verb is a present imperative preceded by “μὴ;” stop it!

Why should these Anabaptists stop preventing the infants coming to Jesus? The Baptists should stop it because “τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ – to them is the Kingdom of God.” Again we note the connection of that idea to the parable that He has just told, which is probably why the LSB lectionary compilers added this to the reading.

17. As He often does, Jesus now takes an object that is present, and uses that object as a metaphor to teach a spiritual truth. In this case, He uses the infants to make a simile for His readers. Not only should they stop barring these mothers from bringing their infants to Him, but they themselves should become like those infants if they want to get to heaven.

Law/Gospel

Humble/Exalted – The natural man acts like the Pharisee, because he thinks like the Pharisee. The Law convicts the natural man of his sin and he is humbled by and under it. The faithful Christian is the repentant Christian, the one who has been so humbled. At that point the Christian is ready to be exalted by the proclamation of the Gospel. Because of the humiliation of the cross, the Christian is exalted to the high heavens, to dwell on this earth for a time, to join in the heavenly host for eternity.

Righteous/Righteous – Dr. Pieper correctly observed that there are only two religions in the world; the religions that teach people to seek salvation in their own good works, and the religion that teaches that God has saved people in Christ. There are likewise only two kinds of righteousness; that of self and the good works of self, and the righteousness that is imputed by faith in Christ. The first kind is defective, and the second perfect.

No Baptism/Baptism – The proclamation of Baptism is Gospel. If you look at all the things that the Bible says are going on in Baptism, it's a pretty long list. Each of the items in the list has a corollary in the Law; dirty/washed, dead/alive, no Spirit/Spirit. If the Gospel should predominate every Sunday, then it ought to especially when you are talking about Baptism.

Original Sin/Forgiveness – Original sin is a problem, and is dealt with in Baptism.

Not Brought/Brought – Many more *are* not brought to the living waters of Holy Baptism than *are* brought. Holy Mother Church, working in conjunction with God the Father, spiritually births babies by delivering the Holy Spirit. If the Christian left church thankful that he had been so brought, then that would be a good thing. If they leave like that they will also be more likely to return next week. The corollary to that is that we get tired of preaching that tries to make us act more like Christians by preaching the Law.

Sermon Titles

Two Praying Men

The Pharisee and the Publican

How to Pray

Compare and Contrast

Bring the Children

Hymns

Today Your Mercy Calls Us – LSB 915

Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness – LSB 563

Anything from the *Prayer* Section – LSB 766 - 780

Anything from the *Justification* Section – LSB 555 – 576

Anything from the *Baptism* Section – LSB 594 – 605

Sing songs from the *Beginning of Service* and *Close of Service* during the non-festival portion of the Church year. Only one hard hymn, no matter how good the words, is allowed per Sunday. Sing songs that have good words and that people like to sing.

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa