Dear Parishioners,

Often we hear someone tell us that they have _news_ for us. Whether it is good news or bad news depends on one’s point of view. Jesus tells a story about a sinner who receives commendation from God and a saint who receives condemnation from God after they pray in the Temple. If you identify with the saint, it is bad news. If you identify with the sinner, it is a surprising good news story. Depending on one’s point of view, it is a story with the power to shock, or the power to bless.

In the first century, tax collectors were especially resented. The Romans auctioned off the job of tax collector in each local village to the Israelite who paid the highest bribe. In return, the tax collector was granted the privilege of squeezing tax out of his Jewish neighbors, plus any amount he could collect in addition which he could pocket. Tax collectors were considered unclean and unwelcome in the places of worship and other gathering spaces.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, enjoyed the unqualified respect of the Israelite community. The Pharisees were religious volunteers, men who did something else for a living, but who studied, taught, and observed the religious Law with scrupulous care. The people loved and respected them more than any other sect within Judaism. The respect was hard-earned by their careful practice of obedience to the commands of Scripture. If the Bible commanded a tithe to be paid from their income, they would pay a double tithe. (Wow! This could make a pastor work to bring back the Pharisees.)

When both men come to the Temple, the tax collector only concentrates on God in his prayer, while the Pharisee spends most of his energy focused on how much better he is than the tax collector. The sinner throws himself upon the mercy of God; the Pharisee recites his spiritual resume. Both men would be shocked to hear the opinion of God over their respective prayers.

Is this story good news or bad news? It all depends on your point of view, doesn’t it? For those of us who wish their good deeds added up to automatic deposit with God, this story is unsettling. But for those who thought they were forever rejected from God’s favor because of their miserable spiritual resume, this story is surprising good news.

We, of faith, would be wise to be ever on guard against all forms of showy, self-centered piety. We who follow our Lord do so limping, stumbling, and seeking mercy, because God’s grace will triumph over human folly and sin. God does have mercy on sinners. Thanks be to God!

In Christ,

Fr. Don