

“God be merciful to me, a sinner!” A sinner, who is prone to making mistakes...

If you haven't heard me say it yet, I'm likely to say it often. I'm one of those people who is a “perfectionist in recovery” — if there is such a thing.

You see, in an ideal world, I think I would be quite happy, if only I could do things perfectly. If I always knew the right answer, or just the right solution to address the problem of the day. If I were able to quell those nagging judgments of others that flit through my mind when I disagree with them, or those feelings of self-righteousness that sneak up on me when I'm a little too confident and full of myself.

If I were able to avoid those moments of embarrassment when I've shared a peek at my naivete or vulnerability.

If only I could do all of these and so many other things perfectly, then I think I might be quite happy...or NOT!

Thank heavens, that the Good Lord knows my heart!

I am thankful, because every time I find myself on that path where I'm headed towards indignation, self-righteousness, or self-aggrandizement, God sends me a message — a little nudge — to remind me that I am but one teeny, tiny, little piece of a grander, bigger picture.

Here's an example:

Years ago, while still in the process of becoming a Priest, I was preaching a sermon that had something to do with our reactions when we begin losing control of a situation. It was before I started using an iPad for my sermons, and as I flipped the page from two to three, I realized that the pages were out of order. Quickly, I fumbled through the remaining pages to find page three, only to discover that it was missing!

A bit panicked, I thought now what should I do? With a roomful of eyes quietly waiting on me, I took a deep breath and told the vulnerable truth. I was missing a page of my text, acknowledging what a good thing it was, that I had written it myself and rehearsed it many times, and I had some idea of what it contained. And, then I acknowledged the “God wink” of the moment. I was so determined to deliver the perfect sermon on what to do when you lose control of a situation, that God had created the perfect stage for its implementation! We all had a good laugh, and I summarized what I could remember from that page, and let go of what I couldn't.

This was an invaluable moment in my formation. In that awkward moment, I learned that it is not our human merit that matters to God. Instead, it is God's unconditional acceptance — of all of us — that makes the kingdom of God available to us. It is not success or perfection that God desires, it is only our willingness to show up and do our best. And, I learned that it's a bonus if we have a sense of humor, so that we can laugh at ourselves as we learn from our mistakes.

God be merciful to me, a sinner...who makes a lot of mistakes!

Turning to our Gospel lesson this morning, there are a couple of nuances that merit our attention. The Pharisee, whom we like to look down upon, is a really faithful guy. As a matter of fact, he's quite the overachiever. You see, in ancient law, fasting was only required once per year, on the Day of Atonement. This Pharisee (and others) held themselves to a higher standard — they fasted twice per week — every Monday and Thursday. The same is true for the tithing. Ancient law required a tithe of all produce of grain, fruit, and herds. The Pharisee gave ten percent of all that he had. And, let us not forget that he was, in fact, going into the Temple to pray. A practice that many of us are familiar with, right?

The tax collector, on the other hand, was seen by all to be a fraud who makes his living by cheating others. Yet, he is seen by God with exactly the same measure of dignity, honor, and respect as this dutiful Pharisee. Yet, even though they were seen by God as the same, the difference I suppose, was in how they approached God: the Pharisee filled with self-righteous indignation; the tax collector with a sense of unworthiness and a total acceptance of his need for God.

As is often the case, God's way frequently reverses our human expectations and turns our ideas upside down.

In God's economy, true humility does not come from our perfectionistic ideals, our successes, or even, the depth of our religiosity and piety. Instead, true humility relates to the care and concern we have for others around us, and the acknowledgement of our own right-sized place in the totality of the kingdom. True humility recognizes our outright dependence upon God, and others, and all of creation.

God, be merciful to us sinners. In this time of history where we are steeped in opportunity to argue, disagree, and make judgments upon one another, God asks us to do something different. This parable reminds us to keep our hearts humble, and our mercy great; and, to tell the truth in love, also to resist the easy temptation to pass judgment, take sides, and become indignant in our self-righteousness. Today, Jesus reminds us that our reverence for God is first, as we acknowledge our dependence upon Him and our need for His guidance and direction. And, second, we trust that if we keep God's love at the forefront of our actions and care for others, we may, God willing, discover that our faith is grounded and transformed in true humility and our own imperfect and error-ridden human selves will be exalted. Happy are we who put our trust in the Lord!

Amen.