

SERMON – THE 11<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 4 SEPTEMBER 2011  
St. Johns Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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I Cor. 15: 1-10

St Luke 18: 9-14

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

The quality of life, yours and mine, is to a great extent connected to what sort of perspective we adopt and nurture along the way rather than the specific trials we face. In fact it is less the particular events; the accomplishments and failures, the fulfillments and disappointments, the dreams or lost hopes, that shape us and more the frame of sight we have that gives life its lasting quality. Erik Erickson, the developmental psychologist, wrote about how we move through life's stages from birth to elder status seeking to find a point of view that will give us the greatest sense of completeness. He says that when we enter the last years of our lives we have to come to a place where we take one of two alternatives. The first is what he terms despair. It is the looking back and around us and having a sense of dis-satisfaction with life. The other is called integrity. It is saying yes to much of what we have done, but more importantly it is saying yes to where we are. It is proclaiming that it has been worth the effort. Truthfully we all probably have some of each as a part of our path, where there are days when we wonder how much more we can manage, and other days when the world is seen through a wonderful light that leaves us simply appreciative of this great gift we have been given! The Collect today sums it up well when it says, "O God, who declares your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity, mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace; that we, running the way of your commandments may obtain your gracious promises..." Perspective is part of the key—seeing our lives through the lens of God's mercy and love rather than possessions and achievements.

I learned something about perspective as a teenager growing up in Tennessee. Each Fall when standard time gave way to Daylight Savings Time an odd phenomena could be noticed. Living only a few miles from the imaginary line that separated the Eastern Time Zone from the Central, we could travel up to Knoxville and sun would begin to set and darkness fall by around 5 PM. But then we would come back west a few miles to where it would be a little after 4 PM and that same level of darkness would be present. I always found that rather annoying. It seemed unfair to loose the hour of daylight and the activities which could be had in sunlight. You folks in the East seemed to have a leg up on us!! Then my father pointed out that the tables turned for us at sunrise. At 6 A.M. we had the same level of light Knoxville only achieved at 7 A.M. PERSPECTIVE altered our view point.

The parable in St. Luke's Gospel today is about 2 men with very different frames of reference. It is part of 2 parables that follow one on the other about prayer and where we stand depending on our approach. Luke frames them with an odd set of words. He says that Jesus tells these parables "toward a necessity". That little set of words is crucial. They tell us that what follows is of vital and life giving importance. We are told

that what gives life the kind of perspective necessary for integrity is to pray constantly. Where the parables take us is not to walking around with a formal prayer on our lips, but toward perseverance and consistency. What does this really do? It brings to us a realization of our dependency on the goodness of God over any things we can do or possess or be on our own. It throws us into the most primary relationship we can have, and everything is measured against that. We need to be honest and not cloyingly pious as represented by the Pharisee in the story. We live in a world and a culture that has so many competing values and messages that it is no wonder we get lost. The yardstick by which successful living is calculated has more to do with ownership, the exercise of personal priorities and power, influence, and seeking after personal self-fulfillment, all of which orbit around a hungering ego that believes it is the center of life. This the great threat to our well being. This parable cuts through and across that point of view and calls for an attitude of humility and acknowledgment that true life comes as a gift unmerited.

No doubt we have heard this parable before. Two men are contrasted perhaps with a bit of overstatement in order to get our attention. One is so wrapped up in self importance that his prayer is dishonorable, yet he represents the very religious structures of his day. The often lost aspect of this portrayal is that there is little indication that reliance on God is part of a daily pattern of life. He follows all the precepts he has come to expect of a faithful person, and the nearly humorous point is that God has become a bit player for him—a sideline to the real hero of the story, which is of course 'himself'. The other is a publican or tax collector. We could easily miss the point if we think that the first century merely had as low a view of taxation as we have come to hold in our time!! There is a reason Jesus uses this public figure. Under Nero, the Roman Emperor, who was in his early years a fine leader before his ego wrecked him, the Publicans had begun to not only collect taxes, but severely abuse their authority. They made new laws that oppressed everyone to the point that Nero actually considered doing away with the office. They were hated by everyone including the Romans. And yet in the parable he, who is seen as the most despicable of persons, approaches his life as one totally dependent on God, asking nothing more than for mercy. He is commended to us as an example of perseverance and faithfulness, and as one whose perspective about his dependency on God gives him true joy and hope. I will not for a moment suggest to you that this is easy or deny that it is a tough discipline, especially when we pray for long periods and seem to get no answer, or get an answer we do not want. But that is the nature of true, open, and loving relationships is it not? We can never predict what will happen, only that we hope and rely on the other. And that hope is fulfilled singularly when we listen. The Publican says only these words, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner". How is it possible to hear God when all we do is chatter, either with our lips or more often in the running of heart and mind like a child on a scavenger hunt? The truth at the heart of this parable is that God is seeking us even more than we seek Him; wanting our full attention so that we finally see clearly what gives us lasting peace.

St. Theophan the Recluse put it this way: “One act is required—and that is all: for this one act pulls everything together and keeps everything in order....This one act is to stand with attention in your heart.” Standing in God’s presence in total reliance is what it means to live in grace—that is the perspective this Gospel offers for us. Amen+