

**SERMON**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**  
**October 27, 2019**

**Luke 18: 9 - 14**

*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

A MIGHT FORTRESS IS OUR GOD

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:  
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;  
His craft and pow'r are great, and, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us;  
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly pow'rs, no thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth;  
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;  
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,  
His kingdom is forever.

"Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" *A Mighty Fortress is our God*—is one of the best known hymns by the reformer Martin Luther. Luther wrote the words and composed the melody in the sixteen century. The words are a paraphrase of Psalm 46. It has been called the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation" for the effect it had in increasing the support for the Reformers' cause. The hymn has been used by numerous composers, including Johann Sebastian Bach. Buxtehude also wrote an organ chorale setting as did Johann Pachelbel. Handel used the melody as well as Telemann. Mendelssohn used it as the theme for the final movement of his Symphony No. 5. And Williams....the list goes on and on.

But when I hear this hymn, I hear of the sounds of Halloween—of *ancient foes, with craft and pow's*, with devils filled. And,

*“The Prince of Darkness Grim.”*

*we tremble not for him!*

*His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,*

*One little word shall fell him!*

In my first parish, 40-some years ago, the organ-meister was named Louis Grim. He was a stern, grumpy fellow with long robes—a black cassock covered with a white surplus that had long wing-like sleeves—and he had a gargoyle sort of face and nose. His thin nose was just as long as those sleeves! Ah, “The Prince of Darkness Grim, we tremble not for him!” The other priest associate and I (both in our 20’s) would “eye” each other across the chancel and snicker when Louis Grim conducted the choir and the congregation sang this hymn. *The Prince of Darkness Grim!* Actually, Louis was a kindly man who took his music and his choir seriously. I still use the recipe his wife gave me for a delicious meat loaf. (Her secret ingredient is poultry seasoning.)

Still, this is the time of year—when the cold wind blows and the leaves fall, and we remember the power of death in our midst. The Prince of Darkness Grim!

We laugh as the children dress up for Halloween. But we tremble with some common angst or fear as the wind blows cold and the darkness descends. Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a poem called *Spring and Fall* about a melancholy little girl watching the leaves fall—

Márgarét, áre you gríeving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leáves like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

Skipping forward in the poem, Hopkins concludes:

It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Death and fear are all wrapped up together this time of year— and we are all reminded.

How about today's Gospel lesson about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisee in today's gospel isn't a bad guy. He's not wrong or worse than the tax collector. He's afraid. He's afraid to face the truth of his own life so he tries to justify himself—to put others down in order to elevate himself. That's black magic— based on deception—to put to elevate yourself by putting others down. He looks at others with a self-serving contempt. But “Me thinks he doth protest too much!” Actually the quote is “*The lady doth protest too much, methinks.*” from Shakespeare's, *Hamlet*. Our contempt betrays our own fear and angst.

When we play the Pharisee, we play the one who thinks, “the right way is always my way, “ “It's my way or the highway.” “Everyone else is wrong.” Pharisaism is the mother of profiling—born of fear and angst. Profiling happens when I look at the outside of another human being and make conclusions and judgments about his or her insides. Looking through the lens of *my way* we take his or her appearance, accent, actions and behaviors, lifestyle and life choices, faith, beliefs and practices, and make conclusions and judgments about his or her value and worth, dignity, motives and desires, intelligence and abilities, holiness and goodness. Pharisaism sees only the outside of the tax collector—and knows nothing about who he really is. He has no idea about that man's fears and hopes, his dreams and aspirations, his pain and struggles. He has no idea that he and the tax collector just might be more alike than he knows or wants to believe. Pharisaic profiling separates us from *the other*. *Otherism*, we might call it. We stand by ourselves.

We raise ourselves up by putting the other down. We fear the stranger, the other, because we fear our own powerlessness. We fear that our life and world are spinning out of control. We fear that which is different and unknown. We fear losing our place in society. We fear there isn't enough to go around and that whatever another gains is my loss. We fear intimacy and being vulnerable. We fear being hurt. We fear seeing ourselves in the other. We fear facing ourselves and the truth of our lives.

We fear “the flood of mortal ills prevailing!” (Luther did have a way with words!) We stand by ourselves looking at the other through the lens of *our way*, and regard others with contempt. Pharisaism.

But what if there is another way? What if we could see and experience the other's life and world as he or she sees and experiences it? What if... what if...*the Christ in me were to see and honor the Christ in you, and the Christ in you were to see and honor the Christ in me*. It's the choice we make every time we encounter another human being, whether it is family, friend, stranger, or enemy. Contempt or honor. Fear or curiosity. What if we recognized that God resides in all people regardless of who they are, and we honor them for that and treat them with same reverence we give God? Contempt or honor.

Here's one of my favorite stories which I hope both illustrates and challenges us to honor and see Christ in each other. (Author unknown but used by Scott Peck)

A decaying monastery, once a great order, had only five monks left.

The order was dying. In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time. The monks always knew the Rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the tree tops.

As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the Rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot at his hut. When the Abbot explained the reason for his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Bible and their faiths. The time came when the Abbot had to leave. "It has been a wonderful visit," said the Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?" "The only thing I can tell you," said the Rabbi, "is that the Messiah is among you." When the Abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, "What did the Rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the Abbot answered. "The only thing he did say, as I was leaving was that the Messiah is among us. Though I do not know what these words mean." In the months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi's words: *The Messiah is among us?* Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one of us is the Messiah? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? As they contemplated in this matter, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah, and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect. It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful

spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery. Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

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May the Christ in me, see and honor the Christ in you. And may the Christ in you, see and honor the Christ in me.

*And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us.*

His truth to triumph through US!

Amen.