

## Pastor Roy's Sermon from Oct. 23, 2016

There are two ways to live our lives. There are two ways to be in relationship. Whether it be with God, with family and friends and neighbors, there are two ways of being and doing.

Our instinct is to focus on getting it right. In fact we tend to order our lives around getting it right, if we stop to think about it. We celebrate those we think have gotten it right. We enjoy relating to those who get it right. The law, whether it in society or our faith, whether it be the 10 commandments, or the beatitudes, or the golden rule to love our neighbor—law is about getting it right.

Now, excellence is a great thing. Of course we all want to get it right. We want to do well, to live honorably, to take care of the people and creation around us.

But. But what happens when we find ourselves unable to get it right? If getting it right provides our self-worth and value, our failures and suffering are a big problem. And if our own worth is tied to getting it right, then the value of others in our eyes also depends on them getting it right.

All of this getting it right leads to a breakdown in relationships. Of course, our judgments do help us survive in the fray—that's why they are instinctual for us, but our judgments drive us from each other. Communion is lost to the constant drive to be approved by God, by ourselves, and by everyone around us. Everyone loses. This way of relating always leads to isolation and despair.

And so, Jesus tells this story *because* we are hard wired to judge ourselves and everyone else based on whether or not we get it right.

The religious leader gets it right. He does what he's supposed to do and he does it well. And we imagine that when he suffers or fails in some way, he just tries harder and overcomes according to the law. He especially follows the rules well compared to others. So what becomes of them in his grand scheme of living?

Can he love? Can he forgive? Is he truly free? According to Jesus, the rule abiding religious man goes home still seeking to be justified as he will do for the rest of his life. And besides he lacks humility. He is stuck in a trap of needing to get it right. He will die trying to get it right.

And without giving up on his quest to justify himself, **he will fail**. Without opening himself radically to all relationships, he will be isolated and without peace. He will be unable to commune with God, his neighbor, and all of creation because he is competing with everyone and everything that he encounters. There will be no joy, no satisfaction, only striving and pressure to succeed. This is misery.

But with humility he could turn around and receive grace and abandon his ceaseless striving after the wind. With prayer and mindfulness he can come to realize his utter need to receive the mercy and peace of God and all those around him. He could learn that he has been swimming in an ocean of mercy all along and never realized it. With humble faith he could be free, but according to the story he is still holding the line on proving himself as he goes home from the temple.

In strong contrast, the public enemy tax collector, a failure of a man who, yes, has plenty of money, but mainly he is lonely and isolated from everyone and everything until he turns back to God with hands up raised, open to receive love and forgiveness because he has finally given up on success, he has learned that struggling to justify himself is a "dead end road." He has learned to surrender, unconditionally, to the freedom and the mercy of God. Love and forgiveness are gifts which he will very soon learn to share, unlike the religious professional who will remain trapped until he despairs of his desperate journey into hopeless goodness.

If we are honest, we will never stop trying to get it right. But if we can retrain our focus on mercy rather than perfection, we and all around us will be able to rest and then enjoy the amazing goodness that is so far beyond us. All of our relationships demand levels of love and forgiveness. A healthy spiritual life demands humble ongoing surrender. Every day we have the opportunity to cry out with the tax collector, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Everything good in our lives comes from that confession--not only to God, but to our neighbor, to our family and friends, even to strangers. And the confession is not about words spoken, but about the way we live and the choices we make.

Is this just another form of getting it right? Maybe, but the difference is humility. The difference is communion. It's not about me. It's not about mine. It's about us and ours. It's about confessing as we are reminded that we can't get it right, "We need mercy! . . . we will share mercy." God be merciful to us, sinners, who don't get it right despite so . . . much . . . effort. Amen.