



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21057

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, September 4th, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Robert Burns wrote: "O God, it is a gift thou gie us, to see ourselves as others see us." Burns, of course, was being ironical because a gift of seeing ourselves as other see us wouldn't be a gift at all. Indeed, it's hard to think of anything more likely to destroy one's sense of self-esteem than seeing one's self through another person's eyes. Every fault and flaw would show up in high relief. And chances are all one's imagined strong points and strengths would fade to nothing.

But actually it is a very rare person who can genuinely picture his or herself from another person's point of view. And perhaps it's for this reason we rarely seem to picture ourselves on the receiving end of the rough edge of Jesus' tongue. And, believe me, Jesus, on occasion, had a very rough edge to his tongue.

He had a battery of invective – and not one of them a curse: "Hypocrites, children of hell, fools, blind guides, whited sepulchers, the children of them which killed the prophets." Indeed, he could elevate of abuse to an art form.

His targets were often Pharisees such as the guy in today's Gospel reading. Jesus poked fun at them in his parables like the one we

have just heard. It's a funny story and it must have raised quite laugh. You can picture the elegant Pharisee in his Brooks Brothers' blazer, penny loafers and no socks, looking with acute disdain at the flashily dressed publican, positively dripping gold chains.

Then, like he's really got a nasty smell under his nose, the Pharisee says: "God, I thank that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even as this publican . . ." The publican, of course, merely stands there, eyes on the ground, beating his breast and saying: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." The publican goes home forgiven. The Pharisee does not. The publican's confession comes from the bottom of his heart. The Pharisee, far from confessing sins, was congratulating himself on his virtues.

Naturally, most Christians tend identify themselves with the publican. The only trouble is that we have got the wrong guy. Publicans were truly horrible people: shysters, con men, crooks, blackmailers, police toadies, traitors to their nation who paid the Romans for the right to extort unjust taxes from the neighbors.

The person we should identify with is the Pharisee. He is like us – a pillar of the

community – patriotic, hard working, a regular churchgoer. He never misses a Holy Day. He tries to follow God's Commandments to the letter – tithing even the tiniest sprig of mint. He is exactly the sort of chap you'd want as a neighbor. He would not only lend you his lawn mower, but clean it up for you afterwards.

But if Pharisees were the salt of the earth, why did Jesus keep picking on them? The answer is that while they certainly tried to lead pure and exemplary lives, they tended to look down on others they found wanting. And, to be frank, the publicans were the very people they should have looked down upon – if we actually had a right to look down on other people.

But the trouble with looking down on people who are less serious about the faith than we are, and, as a consequence, seem to be an awful lot more sinful, is that the habit tends to blind us to our own faults. In other words, our sins when compared with those of truly grievous sinners pale in the comparison, shrinking in our eyes to the status of “little weaknesses” rather than the nasty little sins they really are.

You can see the problem that this habit of comparing ones self with others causes when one studies the Pharisees interactions with Jesus. Every time they meet him they cross-examine him in lawyerly fashion, trying to figure out if he knows as much about the Scriptures than they do.

This is the person they knew to have all of the right qualifications to be the Messiah. This is a man they knew was born into the right family in the right place at the right time. This is a man who is fulfilling to the letter all of the Messianic prophecies and is performing – before their very eyes – all of the foretold Messianic miracles and marvels.

Yet, despite all this, they don't seem the least bit interested in trying to learn from him. They aren't interested in his insight into the Scriptures. All they're interested in is doing is playing a game of scriptural “gotcha.” Jesus' responses – observations that illuminate scripture in a remarkable way – aren't a source of enlightenment for them. They are merely a source of frustration.

The Pharisees, you see, didn't feel a need to learn from Jesus because their habit of measuring everybody else against themselves seduced them into believing they knew God's mind already. God's goals were remarkably similar to their own goals. God's way of doing things was the same as their way of doing things.

The drawback for folks who assume they know God's mind is that they run a very serious risk of leading others astray. Or as Jesus put it: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”

Jesus message in the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee is one we encounter in many other parables – not least the Mote and the Beam. If we want to be good Christians, we should concentrate on putting our own lives in order and not waste our time passing judgment on others.

After all, if we have trouble seeing ourselves as others see us, it's hardly likely we will be able to see other people as they really are. Remember, it is God's job to define what is sinful and what's not. What's more, he doesn't need help passing judgment on others – especially from people who are about to be judged. *AMEN.*