**23 Pentecost, October 27, 2013** [**Joel 2:23-32**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Joel%202:23-32&version=NIV)**,**[**Ps 65**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2065&version=NIV)**,**[**2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Timothy%204:6-8,%2016-18&version=NASB)**;**[**Luke 18:9-14**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2018:9-14&version=NASB)**, Rev Mary Trainor**

On my drive here for the past couple of weeks, I have passed several lawns that are decorated with tombstones, goblins, and ghosts -- they look creepy! They are supposed to, of course, as they are for Halloween, but they do challenge us to think about death. We don't want to think about it, but we do need to prepare our souls for death, as it will be a reality for all of us. As we ponder our own deaths, we examine how we are living - and we have choices. We will know if we made the right choices, because if we do, Jesus will put on us ***the crown of righteousness***, the wreath of victory, at the pearly gates. St. Paul is looking back at his life in today's Epistle, just before he was martyred. He said:"***I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing."***

In today's Gospel, we see two men who have lived very different lives, examining their lives before God. We would expect the Pharisee in today's Gospel to be longing for God's appearing, after all -- he was a religious leader: a learned, holy, well respected man. But surprise! The opposite occurred. When the Pharisee went to God, he boasted with pride about himself; the "I" word dominated his prayer! On the other hand, the other guy, who was a tax collector, approached God with humility! Who would have guessed this? In those days tax collectors were crooks! The Romans assigned each tax collector a region in which to collect taxes; they had to raise a certain amount of money, but the collectors demanded much more than this amount from the people and were allowed to pocket the rest. So, we sure would **not** expect Jesus to see this tax collector guy to be the good guy compared to the learned religious leader! But that is just what happened here. Jesus said, ***“for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*** Jesus is teaching us a lesson here that causes us to examine how we live! We can see parts of ourselves in both the Pharisee and tax collector.

Here is an example of how we might be like the Pharisee: We are driving to church on Sunday morning, looking at others as we pass by, and thinking to ourselves: "**O Lord, I thank thee that I am not like my next door neighbor who is playing golf right now instead of attending worship or my friend who is out hunting instead of coming to church. I am here for you, Lord, and I serve in the church. Thank you, Lord."** Hmmm, let's face it: we all have a bit of Pharisee in us. Pride is the first of the seven deadly sins; it is first because it is the source of many other sins, like greed and envy. Pride is using God's gifts to elevate ourselves above others around us. See the picture of the proud Pharisee on the right side of your bulletin cover. Prideful people want the world to center around them; unfortunately our culture encourages this kind of behavior.

Ok, how about the tax collector? Can we relate to him? Unfortunately, yes: we each have done things to hurt other people -- and we feel bad about the things we have done. This particular tax collector did bad things that hurt other people, and he felt his unworthiness before the Lord, he was very aware of his sin, and how far away he had drifted from the Lord. When we have done something that has offended someone too we want to just crawl up into a little ball, cry, and disappear; we are humbled. That is how the tax collector feels this day in the temple. Look at the picture on the cover of your bulletin -- the humble tax collector is on the left with his head down; the word humility comes from the word "humus" or earth. Humility is the quality or state of not thinking of yourself as better than other people.

I read a funny bit of trivial this week about how 6500 people are humbled: 6500 people per year are injured by the lid of a toilet bowl? The toilet seat! Now, this is one of those things that people don’t talk about much – but for good reason. It is one thing to be injured while you are doing something noble like swinging your grandchild on the playground –but a toilet seat –how humbling for those 6500 people! The opposite of humility is pride. The Pharisee is like us on days that we think we are too good to be injured by a toilet seat lid.

Two brothers grew up on a farm, one went away to college and the other stayed on the farm. The one who went away to college became a lawyer, working in a prominent law firm. One day the lawyer came to visit his brother on the farm, and he asked, "**Why don't you go out and make a name for yourself in the world like I did, and start holding your head up high in the world."**  The farmer replied, "**See that field of wheat over there? Look closely. Only the empty heads of the wheat plants stand up. Those that are well filled always bow low.**"

In the gospel, the tax collector bows low, praying from a humble posture. He beats his breast, saying "***God, be merciful to me, a sinner."*** "***God, be merciful to me, a sinner."*** This simple prayer says so much: first he addresses God as God, with reverence. Second, he begs God to be forgiven. And third, he recognizes that he is not perfect, that he has strayed away from God. This is a complete prayer: adoration, petition, thanksgiving, penitence. This is called, **"the Jesus prayer,"** a prayer that has been used by Christians since the tax collector said it two thousand years ago. You have a copy of the Jesus prayer used today, slightly modified, in your pew to take home with you: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It is good to memorize, as you can recite it no matter where you are. It works equally well when you are walking down the street, in the shower, in church, or in an MRI machine. It is customarily said over and over again in the mind. As you repeat it, it cleans out the clutter in your mind and enables you to focus on and worship God. It gradually draws you closer to God: to a place of pure focus on God, with no focus on self. As we live our lives as Christians our task is to draw nearer to God, and live our lives accordingly; the Jesus prayer helps us.

There is reserved for you ***the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give you on that day when you meet Him***. Choose to live humbly, walking in Christ's footsteps, asking for mercy***. Amen."***