

TALKIN' TO MYSELF
PENTECOST 20 PROPER 25 – OCTOBER 27, 2019
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I've discovered something about myself that I probably shouldn't admit:

When I'm alone, I talk to myself. Out loud. I googled what this means.

One impeccably researched article said it was a sign of dementia.¹

Another impeccably researched article said it was a sign of genius.²

Guess which one I'm going with.

The truth is, many of us have a running commentary going on in our heads.

This self-talk is just a part of being the verbal animals we are.

We all do it; some of us do it out loud.

The issue isn't whether we do it silently or aloud; the issue is: WHAT we're saying to ourselves.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus contrasts two men in the Temple praying.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector both are talking to God,

but they are very much talking to themselves at the same time.

The Pharisee, thanks God – that's good!

He also talks about what he's doing right – nothing wrong with that!

But he doesn't talk about the joy, peace and purpose he finds in his faith,

in following the laws God gave him to love God and neighbor,

to use God's blessing to be a blessing to others.

That's not what he talks about at all.

No, he misuses the Law to lift himself up, to compare himself to others.

He judgmentally tears down his neighbors.

In the Pharisee's misuse of God's Law there was no room

for honest insight as to his own selfishness,

nor compassion for others as they struggle to find their way.

Jesus says that the Pharisee went home UNjustified, Unrighteous.

Why? The Pharisee was not being the person whom God created him to be.

In contrast, the Tax Collector talks only about himself.

He doesn't compare himself to anyone else; he doesn't give a catalog of his sins;

But he does do honest self-assessment: he acknowledges that he is a sinner: selfish, self-absorbed.

The Tax Collector then simply asks for God's mercy. No excuses. He just asks for God's mercy.

The Greek word translated here as "mercy" has a beautiful definition.

The word means "gentle reconciliation into a state of peace."

It doesn't mean, "You're not guilty." It's reconciliation in spite of guilt.

The Tax Collector asks God to forgive him and reconcile their relationship.

He was trusting in God's promise to welcome all sinful flesh,

to gently bring all humanity into God's peace, joy and gladness.

In this trust, Jesus says, the sinful Tax Collector went home justified:

Why? this self-aware, trusting man was being the person God created him to be.

This faith of the Tax Collector as he talked to himself showed true spiritual maturity.

Not so with the Pharisee, who tore others down so he'd feel better about himself,

and not so with an entirely different class of sinner: those of us who tear ourselves down.

¹ <https://askthepsych.com/atp/2007/07/31/elderly-mother-talking-constantly/>

² <https://www.elitedaily.com/life/culture/people-talk-to-themselves/1105688>

We see that tactic at work in the passage from Romans:

Paul describes his spiritual struggle in a desperate and vivid account of how he doesn't do the good he wants to do, but the bad he doesn't want.

He sees his mind and body, his faith and his actions, at war with each other.

He is, indeed, a miserable human being!

There is a big difference between honest insight of where we could do better, and this despair of self-loathing; this certainty that we're not worthy; this assurance we give ourselves that we're garbage.

I don't know about you, but these verses from Chapter 7 of Romans painfully describe way too many days of my life as I judge and condemn myself over and over and over again, calling myself horrible names.

Some of us in fact have done hateful and awful things, making ourselves miserable.

Some of us bring ourselves down, calling ourselves horrible names, making ourselves miserable.

Everyone in this boat of misery (and be thankful if you're not in it!) yearns for someone to deliver us from our corpse, our living death.

The good news is that Joel promises that God will save God's people: God will bring all sinful flesh to him.

Paul gives ecstatic thanks that Christ Jesus will deliver us, save us.

What do Joel and Paul MEAN when they say God saves us, Jesus delivers us?

It may be a new thought to many, God's salvation and deliverance are not primarily about snatching our individual souls out of hell when we die.

God's salvation is first about how we live life now, about God's way, God's law of mercy, grace, lives lived that bring peace on earth.

Our salvation, our hope, is to follow God's plan and purpose for all creation, which is healing, reconciliation, hope, grace, freedom . . . peace.

Each of us is given a role – no matter how sinful we've been and are – as God's partner in the healing of Creation.

God has already called each one of us, every human being ever born, into a FELLOWSHIP of healers, liberators and forgivers.

God has uniquely gifted each one of us – every person ever born – for some way of doing that; for some way of being a blessing, some way of bringing gentle reconciliation into another's life.

Paul was gifted with the ability to write letters about the transforming power of Christ Jesus in every life.

I have my gifts, you have yours.

There are no exceptions to this!

If you want to see the vast array of gifts the people of this parish share with a hurting world, go to our Mission & Ministry Fair today!

You just might find there's a place for your gifts, too.

God does not coerce us into belonging to this fellowship; it's always an invitation.

We have that terrifying capacity to choose: to choose to use our free will to destroy relationships, to threaten each other into serving our selfish interests, to oppress each other and destroy the land, to cover the earth with blood and fill the heavens with columns of smoke.

We can see it on TV today! Humanity has been doing this for so long over the millennia; we've seemingly gotten to the point where we don't know any other way to get things done.

But, there is another way we can choose!

To accept God's invitation live God's way, we must learn to talk to ourselves the way the Tax Collector did: to be honest about the reality of our sin, our selfish, self-absorbed lives. Pointing out anyone else's sins is totally unnecessary and pointless.

In our honesty about the gap between God's vision and how we live, the door to a new life opens.

It's our recognition of the gap created between God's vision and sin
 that enables Barbara Brown Taylor to say that *Sin is our only hope,*
*[it's] the fire alarm that wakes us up to the possibility of true repentance.*³

The purpose of the fire alarm of sin is not to make us feel bad.

If we just sit there and hate the fire alarm, we're gonna die!

The purpose is to make us move,

to get us out of the burning hell we make for ourselves and each other and to go in another way.

That other way is for God's will, God's plan and purpose for all creation,

to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Isn't that what we pray every Sunday?

The beginning of our new life is for us to yearn so deeply for this other way
 that we get out of where we are to become whom God created us to be.

Amazingly, no matter how much sin we might have to be honest about,

God already sees us as the person God created to be!

When God sees us, he sees this beloved person God created,
 someone created to be a blessing to Creation.

God saw Paul, who had spent years hunting down and killing Christians,
 as THE vehicle for taking the good news of the transforming love of Jesus
 to the middle of the materialistic, violent, creation-harming Roman Empire.

God saw me, who has spent years in self-loathing, wrongdoing, and confusion,
 as a beloved friend who could be taught to share what I've learned and who love.

By calling us "Beloved," God calls us into a life lived
 in the grace and mercy of the God who loves us to death.

God's mercy is the gentle reconciliation of all humanity through Christ
 to bring peace on earth and good will to all people. That's why Christ was born!

It's an eternal invitation calling us to become whom we are created to be.

Can we learn to trust in the wideness of God's mercy?

Do we think it's for everybody else and not for us?

Do we think it's for everybody except those we don't approve of?

Or can we trust that God's mercy is wide enough to cover us all?

If we trust God's mercy, WHEN we trust, we can then, and only then,
 learn to become whom God created us to be.

So, I have a genius idea for when we talk to ourselves about ourselves or someone else:

instead of starting with things like, "Becky, you IDIOT," or others with things like "What a loser HE is,"
 let's start with one word: Beloved.

Whether were talking to ourselves or thinking about someone else,
 let's start with what God calls each one of us: "Beloved."

Let's practice (remember, it's a genius idea): Say to each other "Hey, there, Beloved."

Now practice it for yourself; close your eyes, and say it: "Hey, there, Beloved."

COLLECT OF THE DAY

Holy God, our righteous judge, daily your mercy surprises us with everlasting forgiveness. Strengthen our hope in you, and grant that all the peoples of the earth may find their glory in you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Sin and Salvation*. Cowley, 2000. p.47.

JOEL 2:27, 30-32

You will know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God—no other exists; never again will my people be put to shame.

I will give signs in the heavens and on the earth—blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. But everyone who calls on the Lord's name will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be security, as the Lord has promised; and in Jerusalem, the Lord will summon those who survive.

PSALM 51:1-12

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

And so you are justified when you speak and upright in your judgment.

Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, a sinner from my mother's womb.

For behold, you look for truth deep within me, and will make me understand wisdom secretly.

Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

Make me hear of joy and gladness, that the body you have broken may rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me.

ROMANS 7:14-25A

We know that the Law is spiritual, but I'm made of flesh and blood, and I'm sold as a slave to sin. I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate. But if I'm doing the thing that I don't want to do, I'm agreeing that the Law is right. But now I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it's sin that lives in me. I know that good doesn't live in me—that is, in my body. The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don't want to do, then I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it. So I find that, as a rule, when I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me. I gladly agree with the Law on the inside, but I see a different law at work in my body. It wages a war against the law of my mind and takes me prisoner with the law of sin that is in my body. I'm a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this dead corpse? Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

LUKE 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

SERMON HYMN: *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*

BLESSING: The Wisdom of God, the Love of God, and the Grace of God strengthen you to be Christ's hands and heart in this world, as you go from here blessed in the name of the Holy Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.