

"Thank you, God, for making me great"

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Reformation Sunday and Confirmation, October 26, 2025

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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At our October 16th Church Council meeting our chair, Bud Behlman, switched up the agenda to have program committee reports first. Since there are many reports, he made a point of saying that the reports were not listed in order of importance but that I was to go first.

I said, *"Of course we all know that these are not listed in order of importance, but we all know that mine is the most important."* This was received with a general laugh, thank goodness, since that is how it was meant. I trust by now that you know my leadership style is collaborative and that I envision myself as a leader among leaders.

And this story of Jesus in today's Gospel: it's almost laughable, right? The message is so obvious. A religious leader is full of himself. A tax collector is not. The religious leader touts his spiritual accomplishments to God. As if the God who made heaven and earth and all that is therein, who sprinkled the heavens with constellations and causes the mountains to quake and the sea roar, would be impressed. Yet the Pharisee's prayer boils down to *"Thank you, God, for making me great."*

The tax collector had no such airs. *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."*

So why is Jesus' praise of the tax collector and criticism of the religious leader spiritual news?

Because we continue to seek self-justification and our culture does not reward humility. Watch any sports game, any day of the week. Chests pumped up and pounded, fists in the air, "high-fives" slapped. Watch any political speech of any party. The speaker is usually the best thing since George Washington. Watch any self-help TV program or podcast or read any book on the subject. The boxer Mohammad Ali spoke for an entire society when he said, *"I am the greatest."* There seems little understanding of the nuanced difference between self-confidence and self-glorification, with the latter leading to all sorts of excesses.

In her presentation here last Sunday evening, Amy Julia Becker pointed to this very thing, observing that a mindset of acquiring wealth or status makes us competitive and jealous; and a mindset of moralism and

preference for following rules and programs leads us to believe “If only I do this, I will become that.” Either path is one of self-justification.

One reason the story was scandalous was not only Jesus’ criticism of a religious leader but praise of a tax collector. The tax collecting system in the 1st century made graft almost inevitable. Tax collectors were given territory from which to raise taxes and an amount to be raised for the Roman Empire. How they did it was up to them, backed up by a standing army in Israel that was funded by those very taxes, much to the hatred of the Jewish citizenry. That the tax collector confessed his sin and, in the words of Jesus, “went home justified,” must have stuck in the craw of Jesus’ listeners. You’ll hear more about this on November 16th when I present the first-person monologue entitled “Sinner in a Tree.”

So what does this have to do with us, Reformation and Confirmation? Simply this: the way we live our faith is to emerge from knowing God’s mercy, not trying to earn it. It comes from the self-awareness that we all make mistakes and are granted mercy by a loving God when we repent and ask for it. We don’t earn God’s love. It’s God’s gift to us. The Protestant Reformation occurred, in large part, as a rejection of the idea that we have to earn God’s love by acts of piety and charity. Instead, doing these very acts is a response of gratitude to a gracious, loving and forgiving God. Our job is to be humble enough to admit our mistakes, ask for forgiveness and try our best to not repeat the same mistakes. Once we realize this gift of God, our hearts overflow with gratitude and the desire to live the love we have received. This same idea is the heart of Methodism, rediscovered by its founder, the Rev. John Wesley, in the 18th century.

None of this is to refute the importance of a positive self-image and to resist tearing ourselves down. God does NOT want us to loathe ourselves, our sins notwithstanding. But neither does God want us to pray, *“Thank God I am not like other people,”* either because we think we’re better than others or because we are covering up a feeling of unworthiness.

The tax collector knew who he was before God. The Pharisee did not. How about us?