

Sermon for 20 Pentecost
October 25, 2025
Psalm 65
Luke 18:9-14

Most of us, I think, are at least marginally familiar with the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The musical premiered in 1964, and takes place in the early 1900s in Russia. Interestingly enough, the situation in the play, and the world situation when the play premiered, are both amazingly similar to today. Unrest is part of everyday life; people of faith are being persecuted; and social norms are changing faster than anyone can keep up with. In the play, in the midst of familial and social upheaval, Tevye, a devout and very poor Jewish milkman, turns to his wife with a question that for him, at the moment, overshadows everything else: Do you love me?

His wife Golde, bless her heart, thinks he's going off his rocker. "The world as we know it is coming to an end, we can barely keep food on the table, and you want to know if I love you?" Yes, he does. And though we may smile at how he convinces her to finally answer his question, we can all relate. Because the question "Do you love me?" is one of the fundamental questions that we as human beings ask throughout our lives.

Scientists believe we are hardwired from birth to seek connections: with others, with the world around us, and with God. And we most often frame this search for connection in the context of being loved. Babies who aren't shown physical love do not thrive, and that doesn't change as we get older – we just add in emotional and spiritual love to the mix we're seeking. When we don't feel loved, when we don't feel connected to something outside ourselves, not much else matters. So we spend our lives seeking love wherever we can find it.

Unfortunately, the question "Do you love me?" too often changes into a different, more dangerous question. Someone seeking love will often ask "What can I do to be loved?" Or worse, "What can I do to be worthy of love?" And then the troubles begin. Because when we start measuring ourselves on the worthiness scale, we come up with some of society's most seductive and most dangerous answers. We see the results of asking that question on the nightly news and in social media. "I will be worthy of love when I'm famous. I will be worthy of love when I'm rich (or richer). I will be worthy of love when I find a life partner. When I bear a child. When I'm ordained. When I have the corner office." When we start thinking like that, we start chasing whatever we think will make us worthy. And that means things like wealth, power, position, and family turn into idols, worshiped and

sacrificed to in the quest to be “good enough to love.” Ironically enough, we can even make an idol of our religion. The thing that is supposed to be helping us see the most important connection – the connection to God – instead turns into a thing to be sought for itself.

We find this paradox in our collect this morning, where we ask God to help us love what God commands, so that we may obtain what God promises to us. Now, I have no problem with asking God to help us love God’s commands. Sometimes God’s commands are hard to keep. Sometimes it’s hard to love doing our duty to God and our neighbor. The problem is the part in our collect that ties loving God’s commands to receiving what God promises, as if the one depends on the other. It doesn’t! God loves us freely and unconditionally, no matter who we are or what we do. Of course God desires us to do what God commands and to love what God asks of us. But we don’t have to earn God’s love in that way, or any way. As Father Michael said a couple of weeks ago, our relationship with God as children of God is not transactional. And if we are intentional about it, our relationships with each other stop being transactional, too, because we have the model of our relationship with God to remind us of the way things are supposed to work, with God’s help.

We also find the question “What do I have to do to be worthy of love?” in this morning’s Gospel. I have to confess this is one of my favorite parables. We can’t help but identify with the tax collector, because we’ve probably all felt that bad about ourselves at least once in our lives. And we naturally want to sneer at the Pharisee, and we cheer when he gets his comeuppance... because who wouldn’t? But you know, the situation isn’t as black and white as we might think. Contrary to popular opinion, the Pharisee isn’t a bad person. In fact, by the standards of Jesus’ society, he was the model of a good person. Despite the fact that they often come out on the short end of Jesus’ stick, Pharisees were in general devout, honest, upright, prayerful people – the sort of people you’d really want to have in your temple. Or on the Bishop’s Committee. He is really, truly trying to live a good life as he understands it. In fact, he does more than society expects him to do, and he feels like he has a right to be proud of that.

But therein lies the problem. Because his understanding of the good life has been put out of kilter by how good he is. He thinks he has it made, and he’s not shy about telling God so, and thanking God for making him so! His prayer is about himself. It’s not about God, or even about his relationship with God. It’s about him. It looks to me like in this relationship, God is taking second place.

On the other hand, we have the tax collector, the collaborator, the one you don’t want to have standing next to you in the temple, and you certainly don’t want your daughter to marry. If anyone would be seeking love, it’s this unnamed tax collector.

And yet... he doesn't bother to ask if he's worthy of love, because he believes he's not. The best he can hope for is God's mercy. And he is the one who gets God's mercy. And God's love as well.

This is not to imply that the Pharisee doesn't have God's love. As I said a few minutes ago, God is right there offering love to the Pharisee as well as to the tax collector. But the Pharisee is completely oblivious to God in his prayers. The Pharisee walks out of the temple having left God's gift on the floor. The tax collector leaves, whether he knows it or not, whether he believes it or not, with God's love wrapped around him. The translation says he was "justified" with God, but that has a slightly different meaning than the one we usually think of. It doesn't mean that he was justified in thinking badly about himself, any more than the Pharisee was justified in thinking well of himself. He was justified in the sense that we use "justified" to talk about margins in a document. "Justified margins" are lined up and made straight so that they don't wander and detour all over the place, so that they are in the right relation to each other. The tax collector is in right relationship with God, because he knows that he needs God's mercy and he's open to receiving it.

Interestingly enough, it's when we're like the tax collector, when we know we need God's grace and when we're open to receiving it, that we can identify with the psalmist and the author of our collect. Those are the times when, with honesty and humility, we can ask God to increase in us the graces that God gives, so that we truly can love the work we've been given to do. When we know we're loved by God just as we are, then we want to give back to God as God has given to us, and we take delight in the pilgrimage that is our lives, because we know that, with God's grace, we are being drawn to the courts of God, to live in happiness.

Now, there's one more point I want to make. It is often suggested that this is a parable about humility. Don't be proud like the Pharisee, be humble like the tax collector, and we'll win God's love. But you see, the moment we think that, we're right back in the trap of asking "What can I do to be worthy of God's love?" We take this wonderful story of God's amazing grace and acceptance of who and what we are, and we look at it as a competition that needs to be won. Even with the best of intentions, we keep on asking the wrong question! And we end up measuring ourselves against the people around us, trying to make sure we have more love than they do, trying to make sure we win. We think, if we need to earn God's love, we need to be better than our neighbor. And Jesus makes it quite clear that it's dangerous to compare our relative goodness, whether real or imagined, with that of others, because such comparison divides us from our siblings, and ultimately from God.

What we need to do is go back to the original question, the simple question – Tevye’s question. If we ask God “Do you love me?” then we hear the right answer. God says “Yes.” “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” sinners and saints, tax collectors and Pharisees, as long as they make that call. No matter how bad we think we are, no matter the occasion or depth of our sin, God loves us and will be united with us if we are open to it. When we go to God, God will lavish us with God’s mercy and love. And God doesn’t care what color our skin is, or where we come from, or how much money we have. God just loves all of us because we are made in God’s image.

Ultimately, the Pharisee and the tax collector are the same. They are like all of us here this morning: they need God’s love. The difference is that the tax collector knows it, and the Pharisee doesn’t. The Pharisee is so full of himself that he has no room left to hear the good news, the Gospel: that there is nothing we need to do, indeed, nothing we can do, to earn the grace and love of God. All we have to do is stand there with open arms, open hearts, and open minds, and accept it. The challenge this morning for all of us is to dare to get out of our own way and empty ourselves enough to do just that... and hopefully then change our lives for the better in response to that love. May we be brave enough, and humble enough, to accept that we are all God’s beloved; and may we be brave enough, and humble enough, to do the work God sets before us, loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves, not worrying about what others are doing, but instead rejoicing that we all have a part to play and we all are working toward the same end: sharing God’s abundant love with each other and with the world.

Amen.