There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
A Homily for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost
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Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian K. Wilbert
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May the words I speak and the words you hear be God's alone.
Amen.

The email began this way:
Dear Christ.
Now, let me assure you that I do not have now, nor have I ever had a Messiah complex. But the salutation alone was enough for me to read on. The email continued:
Good morning. It’s been a while since we touched base...
Now I’m even more intrigued because this sounds like the beginning of a prayer...right? You know, some of us may have even begun a prayer or three in a similar fashion, “Hi God, well, it’s been a while since we talked...”

I almost felt voyeuristic reading any further because what if this was a prayer and it had been sent to me by mistake? No, wait a minute, I’m a priest, what if it was sent to me on purpose. So I read on: “As a direct lender, we have pre-approved Christ Church for a line of credit at 7.99% with access to funds up to $200,000.00.” Rats, got me again. And I hit the delete key.

But as I read our Gospel lesson appointed for this morning I began to imagine, what if Jeanne or Brian or Kirby or I could hear your prayers...you who sit out in the pews on Sunday morning.

Of course, sometimes we can, assuming you are offering prayer as part of a committee or a small group, and you’re just doing the needful task of opening or closing a meeting while the clergy listens in.

But I’m thinking here about personal, private prayers—someone’s most confidential and revealing interactions with God. Oh, to have access to the kinds of prayers that reveal people’s truest desires, their deepest fears, and their worst assumptions about themselves!

Now, what with All Hallow’s Eve just around the corner, if this is starting to sound creepy to you, that’s because it is. What could be more intimate than prayer, and therefore what could be more intrusive than listening in on someone else as they bare their soul before God?

But that is exactly what is happening in the parable Jesus shares this morning. We’re listening in on the prayers of two individuals. One offered perhaps on the pretense of being private, but loud enough that everyone else in the temple standing within a radius of 50 feet would over hear it. The other offered quietly, perhaps in a dark corner, and barely audible.

Yes, our Gospel reading portrays two extreme postures toward prayer. First we find ourselves standing front and center in the Temple beside a Pharisee. It is obvious to all who stand in this place that this child of God works hard at following the rites set forth by faith tradition. If there is a jot and a tittle to be attended to, it will be by this one who stands so confidently gazing directly into the heavens as he calls on the name of God.

The prayer offered by the Pharisee is one of thanksgiving–thanksgiving for being different from those around him whose sin is so obvious and whose faithfulness so uncertain.

Next let us picture ourselves in that far dark corner of the Temple. There stands a tax collector, a known cheater whose cheating ways affects almost everyone whose lives come into contact with this particular Child of God. The rites and rules of his occupation are in sharp contrast to those followed by the Pharisee. The Tax Collector’s knowledge of God may be limited but he knows enough to understand that the way he lives his life is not the way of honesty and truth. When he looks at himself he sees his sinful nature only too well. He won’t or can’t look up toward heaven, so he hangs his head low and his hands beat his chest as a sign of his anguish.

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His prayer is one of begging for the mercy of God who hears the prayers of sinners.

Two people at prayer: one who sees only the goodness of his life, the other who sees only where he has in his sinfulness failed. Somewhere in the middle lies the truth of their lives...and of our own. As Christians on the journey of faith our paths are marked by faithfulness and faltering. Our lives are lived in honesty and deception. None of us in only good and none of us is only evil. It is vital for us to understand that spiritual truth regarding both ourselves and others. Which brings us to the words in the final chapter of Paul’s second letter to Timothy. Writing in Paul’s name, the author of the letter speaks as a seasoned traveler communicating with a young not so seasoned traveler; there is a sense he knows the end of his life is near. In summing up how he views his life he says, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. In the final analysis, as Paul looks back over the years passed, he doesn’t assess whether he’s finished the race in first place or last. He doesn’t spend his words determining whether his form while running the race was perfect or not. In the end, he simply sees that he was the best he could have been. And that is enough. God stood by faithfully, giving Paul strength, courage, and hope. Now, as his life nears its end, Paul reflects on the faithful presence of God and is confident that who he was in the past, who he is in the present and who will be even as he enters into the fullness of God’s presence is enough.

As we travel life’s way, it is not our merit that will make us enough, nor is it our failings that will keep us from being enough. If we can look at ourselves and see ourselves as we really are, children of God who have known sin and mercy, we can know with certainty that it is enough, we are enough because God is enough for us all.

Saint Luke is the evangelist most emphatic about God’s mercy and preference for the poor and humble. Let us be careful about what we assume when we hear the prayers of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Let us not make narrow the wideness in God’s mercy because we don’t know what God hears when God listens to the prayers of the world.

Some of us here are familiar with the American folksinger Kate Campbell. She’s been to Ohio a few times in the past 15 years beginning with Bishop Hollingsworth’s consecration. One of the hymns she both sings in her concerts and has recorded is Frederick William Faber’s 1862 hymn “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy.” Frederick Faber was born into the Church of England but during the early years of the Oxford Movement he followed John Henry Newman into the Roman Catholic Church. Because he believed that Roman Catholics should sing hymns like those written by John Newton and Charles Wesley, Faber wrote 150 hymns himself. The original text for “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy” contained 12 stanzas of four lines each. Most hymnals including The Episcopal Hymnals published in 1940 and 1982 omit a stanza which pointedly reveals how we try to constrict God’s mercy. It reads like this:

But we make God’s love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify God’s strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

When used in it’s entirety, that stanza is coupled with one more familiar to us:

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

I appreciate that a theologian and musician like Kate Campbell includes the oft times left out verse in her performances of Faber’s hymn because it reminds us that we dare not make narrow the wideness in God’s mercy. Why? because we don’t know what God hears when God listens to the prayers of the world.

We do know this, however; that no one resides beyond the reach of God’s compassion and God’s desire to reconcile. We also know that the prayer “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” is a pretty good place for anyone to begin. And God likes to answer that one, whether it is prayed by a tax collector or parish clery, or anyone else for that matter. And that, I know, is a message that will preach not only in Poughkeepsie but also Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Thanks be. I’ve said these things to you today in God’s most holy name. Amen.