Here’s the thing about Jesus:

his good news was good news

for everyone.

If the good news he teaches and preaches

seems to leave someone behind,

then we didn’t get the message right.

Even in the moments

where he is saying hard things

or speaking serious truths,

or poking, prodding, and provoking,

he is inviting us to see and know

a world that is wider,

a God that is bigger

than what we think we see and know.

That’s why the more closely

you follow Jesus,

the more interesting your dinner companions

start to become.

And here’s the thing about grace:

it isn’t actually fair.

That’s why Jesus’ message

pokes and prods and provokes.

And here’s the thing about parables:

they’re supposed to get you right here.

They’re supposed to

kind of take your breath away,

change your perspective

or set something free.

That’s why

when the message seems obvious,

we have to keep digging.

Jesus noticed that his disciples

thought they had life

pretty well figured out,

and that they didn’t have much time

for people who seemed like

they didn’t.

So he told them a story.

Two men find themselves

at the Temple to pray

at the same moment.

They don’t really meet there exactly,

they stand apart from one another –

and apart from everyone else

who is at the Temple praying.

Alone.

Isolated.

One man is a Pharisee.

Now, we’ve been conditioned

to automatically not like this guy –

and his prayer, which comes off

to our ears a tad judgmental –

doesn’t help.

But the people hearing this story

wouldn’t have the same

bad taste in their mouths.

Pharisees are faithful people,

people who keep the law,

not because they think that

the law will win them God’s favor,

because they are responding

to God’s grace by

living their lives the way

that they believe God wants them to.

Just like us.

The thing about THIS Pharisee,

as Jesus tells the story,

is that he does everything and then some.

Jesus is creating a caricature –

meant to bring a knowing smile

to the faces of the readers.

If Jesus was telling the story

to us today,

he would probably use

the head usher,

and he would describe them as

being the first one there on Sunday morning

and the last one to leave,

serving on every committee,

organizing the 48-hour prayer vigil,

and the Christmas bazaar,

and Bible School,

and the food drive,

giving more than their tithe

and then buying everything that’s left over

from the youth group’s bake sale –

which they organized –

and benefits their mission trip to Appalachia –

which they also volunteered to chaperone.

The best one can be –

that’s the Pharisee in Jesus’ story.

His prayer actually beings with thanksgiving,

“God, I thank you…”

And it’s probably a genuine,

if ever so slightly self-righteous

and superior-sounding.

He points out to God

that he is going above and beyond,

but he also says

“thank you God,

that I can live in this way,

that I can do these things,

that you have made it possible for me

to live my faith this way.”

How much farther away

is his prayer, really,

from the times when we

see someone who is struggling

and offer up a

“There but for the grace of God go I”

prayer?

The other man is a tax collector.

And just like we’ve been

conditioned to think Pharisees are the worst,

we’ve been conditioned to think

of tax collectors as generally likeable –

Zacchaeus seemed nice –

they’re not so bad.

But the people who heard Jesus’s story

would respectfully beg to differ.

There was nothing nice

about the person

who collaborated with an occupying government

to take money from the locals

and give it to the foreign invaders.

The tax collector’s prayer

is a prayer for mercy.

Where the Pharisee

talks to God in the first person –

like they’re old conversation partners,

the tax collector

can’t even lift his head –

as if his body is weighed down

by the guilt he brings to God.

I wonder if he places himself

far away from everyone else

because he is so deeply aware

of the sin he acknowledges in his prayer.

I wonder if he feels trapped –

trapped by a corrupt system,

trapped by the need to provide for his family,

not wanting to keep living the way he’s living,

doing what he’s doing,

but he doesn’t know what to do.

How far away is his prayer, really,

from the times in our lives

when we’ve felt trapped

or complicit

or like the things we’ve done

have caused harm to others?

So here they are –

these two different men –

two different kinds of lives –

two different prayers.

And Jesus tells the disciples –

“I tell you,

this man (the tax collector)

went down to his home

justified - -

and then the word he uses in the Greek

is “para” –

*para* the other.

This word *para –*

the root of words like

paradox

parallel

Paraclete

parable - -

can have two different meanings.

It can mean

“rather than”

as usually it is translated

in the story today

“he went down to his home justified

rather than the other”

OR

it can mean

“next to”

as in

“he went down to his home justified

alongside the other”

And now,

here’s where it gets interesting –

one reading suggests antagonism –

this one instead of that one.

The other reading suggests juxtaposition –

this one alongside that one

this one next to that one –

maybe even,

this one *because of* that one.

This is how life in beloved community works –

we bring who we are,

the good, the bad, the ugly

and we place it alongside one another.

It’s like a middle school group project.

Remember those?

There’s the straight-A kid.

The resourceful kid –

the one who is the best at procuring snacks

and other important supplies.

The kid who’s good at art.

And inevitably there’s the kid

who doesn’t really get exactly what’s going on.

And probably the straight-A kid

does the organizing

while the resourceful kid

looks through the pantry

and the artsy kid tackles the visual aids

and the kid who doesn’t quiet

get what’s going on

takes it all in.

When the group comes back

with an A for the project,

the kid who did the organizing

will inevitably say

“they couldn’t have done it

without me”

and the resourceful kid

will inevitably say

“they couldn’t have done it

without my snacks”

and the artsy kid will say

“they couldn’t have done it

without my papier mache skills”

and the kid who didn’t know

quiet what was happening

may just be grateful that

he got his first A of the semester.

And they would all be right.

Because probably the straight-A kid

did the most work.

But while they’re great at organizing,

they don’t know how

to make a papier mache Abraham Lincoln.

And the kid who didn’t know

quite what was going on,

may have shown up with all sincerity

but ultimately needed more

than he could contribute.

I hated group projects in school.

I didn’t understand why teachers

would subject us to such an unfair system.

What I didn’t realize then

was that I was learning from

all of the other kids in the group.

What I didn’t realize then

was that they were learning from me.

That we needed each other.

That, sure, someone else might benefit

from something that came easily to me,

but that is what generosity looks like,

that is what grace looks like,

and actually –

giving something of yourself

on behalf of another person

is what justice looks like –

divine, Godly justice –

which has room

for both Pharisees and tax collectors.

Just like grace

is big enough and wide enough

for Pharisees and tax collectors

and brains and athletes

and princesses and basket cases

and criminals

and even people who

have never seen “The Breakfast Club.”

And that is good news.

For everyone.

Today is World Communion Sunday.

We gather at a table

that stretches around the world

and includes not only us here,

but the Communion of Saints

who have gone before us,

and Christ who invites us.

This is a table that is big enough

and wide enough

to have a place set for everyone –

the sinners,

the saints,

the in-betweens.

This is a come-as-you are table.

Some of you are

killing it at life right now,

some of you are blameless

in the ways you’ve lived,

some of you live

to go above and beyond

for Jesus and for others - -

Yay! and Thank you.

Come to the table.

Some of you are struggling right now,

some of you are

on the verge of relapse

or breakdown

or divorce

or selling your kids to the circus.

Okay.

Bring it to the table.

We will hold it with you

or maybe we’ll just

hold you.

See this is not an invitation

that says “yes, come, you’re welcome here” –

this is an invitation that says

“we NEED you here - -

all of you,

and each part of you –

the stuff you want to

shout from the rooftops

and the stuff you can

barely whisper in prayer.

Come and bring it all

and we will lay it down next to each other

and we will sit down next to each other

alongside of each other

and we will speak words of grace

with one another

and to one another –

and we will learn from each other

and we will find our hearts and our worlds expand

for having been together

and we will walk away changed,

transformed,

made new

because of our time together

in the presence of Christ

who calls each of us beloved

who calls each of us indispensable.

I am so grateful for each of you.

To be at the table with each of you.

Thanks be to God

for this communion we share.

Amen.