When I was a student at Nashotah House Meredith went to a 4K program at Christ the King Lutheran Church here in Delafield. It so happened that in her class was the child of another seminarian. Now, when December rolled around, in accordance with the final commandment of Jesus, the kids put on a Christmas pageant (if you don’t recall this command it came right after Jesus told Peter to feed his sheep). The pageant was standard four-year-old entertainment with many of the parents doing their best to block my view in order to try and film every moment of this riveting affair that was unfolding before our eyes. The rest of the parents just seemed to be happy that their kids kept their costumes on and seemed at least mildly aware that they were participating in a Christmas pageant. The next day my fellow seminarian stopped me to tell me that he had noticed that during the pageant our two children had been the best behaved of the lot and he chalked this up to our superior Christian parenting, because, after all we were candidates for Holy Orders. His statement was meant as a compliment, but I have to say that I found it all a little creepy and presumptuous. For I would love to stand up here today and say by my very nature as a priest I am superior to everyone here, but it would simply not be true. I feel that as a father I am kind of like the films of Frances Ford Coppola. There is some pretty good stuff, a tremendous amount of mediocrity and a number of things I really wish I had not done. In other words my range goes from Godfather I all the way to Godfather III.

What my fellow seminarian exhibited was the tendency in humanity to take on a title or position and then believe that this title or position makes us somehow better than who we actually are. Lord Acton, who was famous for his quip about absolute power corrupting absolutely, said in the same letter where this phrase originates, “There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.” God may have called me to be a priest but this in no way makes me holy and pious. And so now that I have probably told you what you already know about my nature let me tell you why I am sharing this and that is because of the passage we have in today’s Gospel reading. It’s a very short parable from Jesus so let me just reread it quickly. Jesus says, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, `God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, `God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

We have two characters. One who believes he is insulated from sin because of his position and actions and one whose position and actions offers him no protection, at least in the eyes of the world. And while the Pharisee offers a list of his virtues they are mainly of the “I’m not Pol Pot variety.” And as is so often the case in the parables of Jesus he uses rather extreme examples as a way to get his point across quickly and starkly. The danger for us is in such vividness is if we see the parables as just about the characters presented. In other words we are not to say afterwards, “Thank goodness that I am not a Pharisee like that guy.” Rather we are to look at this and ask what are the things we hide behind that we falsely believe sanctifies us and what will it take for us to be like this tax collector who has a complete and honest conversation with God about who he is?

I think most of us live in what I would call a sort of “not too bad” existence, what in the Book of Revelation is described as lukewarm. What I mean by this is we aren’t terrible people. We give some money to charity, we try and make it to church and we don’t smoke funny cigarettes. Many of you I am sure have read Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New World*. In this novel most of society is given a drug called *soma* which is governmentally provided and it allows its takers to escape pain, discomfort, embarrassment, sadness or anger and to enhance joy, arousal, and an overall sense of well-being. Or as it’s described in the book it has, "All the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects." This drug kept people safely in the middle. No great highs nor any great lows. And I think many Christians have become *soma* Christians, happy living in the pretty good. We are not super sinful nor are we super saintly. We wouldn’t overtly make a statement like the Pharisee does today nor would we make a statement like the tax collector. We are neither completely delusional nor completely honest. But this has real world consequences, because even in the pretty good we can act just like the Pharisee today.

If we can be a Christian and have not a whole lot expected of us beyond being fairly good then there is not much point to being a Christian. While we may not be as overt as the Pharisee this morning the pretty good has become the pinnacle for most of us. If you have paid much attention to many church growth strategies, much of the thinking is focused on how do we get people to church without it feeling too much like actually going to church. That is how can we get people to be Christian in a convenient and non-threatening way? We don’t want anyone to come to church and be convicted like the tax collector this morning because if they are they might not come back.

In the same vain I would argue that we have become pharisaical mediocrities thanking God that he does not ask too much of us. The church is something nice, but not something transforming. The tax collector today was seeing who he was and asking God to change and heal him to transform him into who he was created to be. And if we remove the layer of contented mediocrity and are honest we will realize that much about us needs to change and be healed by God. Just as a quick example and because confession is good for the soul I was convicted the other day that I need to love people more, that I judge quickly and because of this judgement I feel that I can ignore others because I have made them into something undeserving of love. In other words my love for people is pretty mediocre – I love some people and others not so much.

There is a theory that God only allows us to see the amount of sin in our lives that we are capable of dealing with. What this means in practicality is that if we are not seeing any sin it is not because it is lacking but rather because we are not growing in God. Because if we were God would be preparing us to to deal with the sin that is preventing us from growing closer to him. Today the Pharisee had insulated himself quite comfortably in a bubble, a bubble that asked very little of him in terms of personal growth (although it did seem to ask quite a lot of other people). But that is not where we are asked to live, instead we need to live like the tax collector who cried out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” This tax collector shed himself of all pretense so that he could be filled with the glory of God. Growing towards God requires honesty, the honesty to escape the pretty good so that we may live in God’s glory this day and forevermore.