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The Gift of Mercy
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, October 27, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Have you ever been in the wrong place at the wrong time? One Saturday afternoon in 1904, a group of midshipmen at the Naval Academy decided to blow off some steam by having a secret rooftop party that night that would violate many of the Academy's regulations. They drew straws and the one who drew the short straw had to go into Annapolis and buy the beer. The unlucky midshipman selected made it through the gate. He went to the shop of a tailor who was known to keep beer in the back room. As the midshipman loaded his suitcase with cold beer, he noticed a handsome, dark-haired gentleman in the tailor's shop. The following Monday morning, guess who the midshipman saw in the instructor's chair. That same handsome, dark-haired gentleman, now in uniform. He was Lieutenant Commander Levi Calvin Bertolette, who had just reported for duty at the Naval Academy.

The midshipman sank in his seat and was horrified. He knew he would be summoned at the end of the hour and that would mean an early end to his naval career. He wondered how in the world he would ever be able to show his face in his tiny hometown of Kerrville, Texas. The whole town there had made it their yearlong project to get him, their native son, into the Naval Academy. He wondered how he could ever face Mrs. Susan Moore, his teacher, who volunteered her afternoons, evenings and weekends to tutor him to pass the entrance exam. He sank deeper and deeper into his chair as he came to terms with the dark truth. His life as he knew it was over. He might as well be dead.

When the bell rang to end the hour, guess what happened. Nothing. The chances are that Commander Levi simply did not recognize the beer purchaser on Saturday. But the midshipman always believed otherwise. He knew that he had been granted mercy. That moment of feeling mercy defined the rest of his life. And that moment marked the real beginning of the naval career of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the man who led the Navy from the disaster of Pearl Harbor to the triumph of Midway in World War II.

Mercy is at the heart of our Gospel passage today. Notice the Pharisee is standing by himself in the temple. His faith is based around his own individual scorecard of deserved reward. In essence he says to God, 'Thank you for who I am and what I have done.' And he adds, 'Thank you for what I am not, especially that I am not like that tax collector over there.'

The tax collector on the other side of the temple was among the most despised of the despised. Tax collectors were known to be cheats and collaborators. And this tax collector was probably guilty as charged. But notice how he prays. He does not even look up to heaven, because he feels unworthy to do so. He beats his breast and cries out, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' He sounds

like a man at the end of his rope, much like Chester the midshipman squirming in his seat as that long hour ticked away. He sounds like a man who is dying.

At first glance, this parable seems to be about humility. But Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest who spent his whole life wrestling with the parables, writes this story is less about humility and more about death and resurrection. The uncomfortable truth for both the Pharisee and the tax collector is that they're both dead. The difference is the tax collector knows it, while the Pharisee doesn't.

Capon writes, 'God will not take our cluttered life, as we hold it, into eternity. He will take only the clean emptiness of our death in the power of Jesus's resurrection. He condemns the Pharisee because he takes his stand on a life that God cannot use; he commends the tax collector because he rests his case on a death that God can use. The fact, of course, is they're both equally dead and therefore both alike receivers of the gift of resurrection.'

It would have been interesting if Luke had told us how the tax collector lived his life after his plea for mercy and after he received the gift of justification on his way home. But we do know the story of how Chester Nimitz lived his life after his moment of receiving mercy, real or perceived, from Commander Levi. By the way, it seems a strange coincidence that his mercy came at the hands of a man named Levi, the other name of Matthew, the one apostle of Jesus who was a despised tax collector.

After Commander Levi did nothing to him at the end of his fateful hour, Chester Nimitz vowed then and there to look with a lenient and tolerant eye on first offenders when they appeared before him as their commanding officer. His resolve on this point was put to the test when he was named commander of the Pacific Fleet after the disaster of Pearl Harbor. Chester's temptation was to clean house of the command staff after the fleet was caught completely off guard by the surprise attack. Instead, he kept nearly all of the previous Admiral's people on staff. Nimitz wanted to give these sailors a second chance. This decision rebuilt morale and had the practical effect of allowing the Navy to focus on striking back rather than building a new staff.

One of Chester's greatest gifts was as a delegator. In the new book, *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character*, Admiral James Stavridis writes, 'Being an effective delegator means first and foremost sublimating your ego and allowing others to shine in the spotlight. That reflects self-confidence and an inner sense of balance that keeps the ego in check. Nimitz was supremely resourceful, creative, and humane in how he dealt with the people around him.'

Perhaps that is also how the tax collector lived his life after his moment of mercy. When we are given a second chance, a new life, there is something inside us that drives us to build up and to give new life to others.

Chester Nimitz and the tax collector discovered what that something is – the gift of God's mercy. And that is a gift to be shared.

Amen.