



Novena of Grace 2021

Readings: Hosea 6: 1-6 | Psalm 51: 3-4, 18-21ab | Luke 18: 9-14

Grace: We pray for the grace to rest in God's merciful embrace, letting our hearts be softened.

I was recently in a grocery store (it's where I go for fun these days) and in front of me in line was a young man with his mask under his chin. I thought "How could you not wear your mask properly? We are all wearing masks to take care of each other, do you not even care about your neighbor?" As I watched, the checkout attendant tried to reason with this chin-masker to fix his mask, and he became enraged. I thought: "This guy is the worst," and oops, there I go again, my internal Pharisee getting the better of me. I have to say, I'm pretty good at being the Pharisee, figuring out how I'm better than others.

The Pharisee sees himself as having the moral high ground, and according to the law, he does. The problem with playing the Pharisee is that my judgments don't bring me closer to that young man, just as the Pharisee's judgments don't bring him closer to the tax collector - in fact, they drive us further away. And separating myself from other people means that I don't see the Christ in them, which, simply put, is sin.

My judgments of the young man in the grocery store or the many others I find myself judging, come when *I'm* not at my best. They come when I have issues with my own self that I'm not acknowledging that are thus affecting how I view other people. I don't want to or don't know how to deal with my own insecurities, so I stand in judgment of others so that I can feel better about myself.

This is what Richard Rohr calls the "shadow." The shadow is the part of me that I am ashamed to show others. I am ashamed of it because I judge it, and I fear others would like me less if they knew that part of me. To be clear, shadow isn't sin, but when I live in a way that pretends my shadow doesn't exist, it leads me to sin - to separation from those around me. Growing up, I took pride in being considered smart and derived feelings of self-worth from academic success. Thus, my shadow often shows up in academia. It shows up in my desire for people to think I'm smart and capable, and when I don't want to share that I'm struggling. My unacknowledged shadow leads to sin when I hesitate to ask for help. I smile and tell loved ones that "I'm great" and "School is great," and most insidiously - sometimes I struggle to celebrate with others when they succeed. When I try to ignore my shadow, I present a fake version of me that I think others will love... that I think God will love.



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Yet the tax collector calls to me. There is a story that our heart is the dwelling place of God within each of us, and our ribs surround it as a tabernacle surrounds the consecrated host. When the tax collector beats his breast, he is knocking to open the tabernacle, asking God to come out and examine his whole life – his blessings as well as his shortcomings, his deepest struggles, his shadow. He is trusting that God will shine Divine light upon *all* of him, so that he can see and acknowledge the shadow, not to get rid of it, but rather to see it in God's light and love, to befriend and transform it.

To live with a closed tabernacle – a heart closed off to the world around me rather than seeing the world in the light of God's love – is to live as the Pharisee. It is to ignore the fact that I am loved...that all of me is loved. To live as the open-hearted tax collector is to humbly trust in God's unconditional love. Knowing my shadow, the parts of me I am most ashamed of, it is hard for me to accept that a God who also knows those parts of me could love me without condition. But God does. Eight years ago today Pope Francis was elected Pope and he modeled what it looks like to live as the open-hearted tax collector, saying, "I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Trusting in the infinite mercy of God, as the tax collector and Pope Francis do, allows me to go forth in the world *even though* I am not perfect, even though there is a part of me that I am afraid to show the world.

And this is the part of the Gospel story we don't get. What does the tax collector do when God answers his knocking, comes out and shines Divine light? The tax collector eventually needs to leave the temple. And what does he do when he does? Does he go back to being the tax collector he was? How does experiencing the light of God inform how he interacts in the world, outside of the four walls of the temple?

In this last year, so much has been brought to God's divine light, through so many Black people in this country knocking at the tabernacle of our society. In this illumination, both loving and painful, I have tried to look, intentionally look, at the part of my shadow which includes white privilege. God's divine light shines upon the many ways in which I have benefitted from a society built upon slavery, injustice, violence against Black bodies, and in order to draw nearer to others, I need to look at it. It's not easy, but it's so important.



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But I can't stop there. As the tax collector did, I also have to leave the temple. Leaving the temple makes me nervous. Similar to my insecurities around academia, I am afraid of messing up when it comes to racial justice work. I am afraid that I will say the wrong thing and my words might hurt someone. I am afraid that I might come off as ignorant, or not understanding of the pain that others are experiencing.

How does looking at my whole self under God's divine light inform how I move forward? My shadow can manifest as fear inhibiting my action, but with God's light shining around that, I know that I must not be stopped by fear. When I enter into racial justice work, I will make mistakes. I will fall short. I will say the wrong thing, and heaven knows my internal Pharisee will show up at times. *And* the work is too important to let my shadow rearing its head stop me. How do I instead befriend it, to keep me aware of my potential impact as I join in the work of building racial justice?

So I'm trying to befriend my shadow now, acknowledging my privilege in a way that leads me to address the sin of racism inside of me and in society through personal work and work for justice. How does the tax collector move forward, boldly into this new life, after receiving God's light upon *all* of his life - the blessings and the shadow - embracing and using his history to inform his present and future? How do I use my history - my blessings and my shadow - illuminated by God's divine light, to inform my present and future? And the work is long, so after leaving the temple, going out into the world for change and action, how will I know when to keep knocking at my tabernacle?

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Day 5 | March 13, 2021

Reflection Questions:

What part of my personality keeps me from humbly seeking God's mercy?

In what ways does my shadow prevent me from engaging with the world?