I have always been fortunate to have wise and talented mentors placed in my life. I am blessed by their insight and their guidance. The best part of these relationships comes from the assurance that I can go to any of these strong and wise women with my deepest feelings, fears, foibles and joys. They are there for me, always non-judgmental, caring and tough.

So, here’s the kicker…. It is not unusual for me to call or meet with one of them and rattle off a litany of all of the things I have been doing, accomplishing, planning and experiencing since last we met. And it’s also not uncommon for me to relate an incident, at considerable length, and with great emotion, where I was challenged or troubled, and how I handled the situation and worked it all out to a satisfactory end. Invariably, my mentor, who has just endured my rattling on, will comment that she is glad I’m doing OK now, but why didn’t I reach out for help in the midst of the problem. And my spiritual director will also toss out the very humbling, *“So, Sandi, where was God in all of this?”* OUCH!

The parable that Jesus puts before us today is one of those that we have heard so many times we could recite the story by heart. The characters, a Pharisee and a Tax Collector, go up into the temple to pray. The Pharisee stands by himself, set apart in a prominent place where no one can miss him, lifting his eyes upward, and runs down the list of religious accomplishments and spiritual sacrifices he practices and performs. *“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.”* I have to say that I can identify with the Pharisee more than I would like to admit, and I’ll bet he reminds you of someone you know too.

Or maybe you have run across the tax collector at some point in your life. The person you would never expect to see in church, never mind on her knees, pouring out her heart and soul for mercy, and declaring herself a sinner, and in need of help. She has reached her bottom and it is only through surrender that she can be reconciled to God and the community. Have you met her? Perhaps you, like me, have been there too at some time in your life?

I have to admit that when I saw what the Gospel passage was for this morning, I said to myself, I know these people. I know what kind of people they are. Just think about it. When Jesus starts a parable with, there was a Pharisee….where does your mind go? Do you think you know him because of what he is…a Pharisee? The name, ……Pharisee…… just leaves a bad taste in our mouths, doesn't it? These are the guys that are always trying to trip Jesus up, trying to get him on a technicality, right? But this is not the context in which we encounter this person who happens to belong to the group Pharisee.

Centuries of Christian interpretation have led us to believe that the Pharisees are the bad guys, but this is not entirely fair. The Pharisees were really the good guys in society. They were defending the Jewish faith against becoming diluted by the secular pressures around them. They were dependable, honest contributors to the community. This Pharisee was really the kind of person we want to have in our churches. He prays, tithes, and adheres (perhaps a bit too strictly) to the religious and spiritual practices that are expected of him.

But here is where the Pharisee misses the mark as he prays to himself. That upstanding pinnacle of the community thought he knew that tax collector for all that he wasn’t. He might have even wondered how someone like him was ever let into the temple. You know tax collectors were despised and distrusted by the people in the community. They, like the Pharisees were wealthy and powerful, but for all the wrong reasons. The tax collector was a collaborator with the Roman occupiers and oppressors; making money off the backs of the people by not only collecting the Roman tax, but then adding in whatever means of extortion he could to make a good living for himself.

We don’t know why the Tax Collector came to the temple that day. We don’t know what led him to a place in his life where he knew he was in need of mercy and forgiveness. But there he was open and naked before God, wearing his need for all to see.

And we also don’t know why the Pharisee was unable that day to recognize his own need for dependence and humility before God. Perhaps our upstanding citizen was afraid to be anything but what society expected him to be in public. I think that is hard for us to do, …….to show our vulnerability and to risk falling below the expectations of who and what we think we are supposed to be. It’s not easy to ask for help or admit we are powerless and in need of God’s grace.

Augustine of Hippo had this reflection on the parable. *“The Pharisee was not so much rejoicing in his own clean bill of health as in comparing it to the diseases of others. He came to the doctor. It would have been more worthwhile to inform him by confessing of the things that were wrong with himself instead of keeping his wounds secret and having the nerve to crow over the scars of others. It is not surprising that the tax collector went away cured, since he had not been ashamed of showing where he felt pain.” (Augustine, Sermon 351.1)*

Our normal reaction to this story is to identify with the humility of the tax collector, and to condemn the proud and hypocritical Pharisee. But often, we who are of the “upstanding church going type” can unconsciously emulate the Pharisee’s self-satisfaction with doing the right things – paying our taxes, pledging for the work of God’s church, and generally not doing evil things. It’s not his piety or dedication we question, but his inability to move past self-reliance to dependence on God.

The danger we face in picking one character in this parable above another is that we will fall into the very same trap as our friend the Pharisee. When my prayer becomes, *“There but for the grace of God, go I”*, I may be standing on shaky ground. Is our prayer of thanksgiving simply about us seeing how different we are from that person from another group we think we know?

I wonder why it is that we humans have such a propensity to see difference and become obsessed with comparisons. That is certainly so very present for us in this time and place in our nation. I know that I can easily fall into “us and them” rhetoric and seek out only those people I know will agree with my own views. It’s at that point that I hear my spiritual director’s gentle probing*…. ”Sandi, where is God in this?”*

So, perhaps is the question for us today when we become discouraged or frustrated, or when we feel we need to put on the brave and perfect face out in public and before our Creator is, *“Where is God in all this for us?”*

My friends, God knows who we are; God has known us since before we were formed. And, isn’t it such wonderful freedom to know whose we are and to whom we belong? Let our prayer not stray into, *“thank God, we are not like that Pharisee”* but, *“Here we are God seeking your mercy.”* **Amen.**