First, I’d like us to pause for a few moments to remember those who died in the fires in Paradise a year ago, and to hold in our prayers those who have evacuated from the fires raging this morning in Sonoma County. Healdsburg, Windsor, Geyserville, North Santa Rosa and other North Bay communities have evacuated.

The churches there are closed, so today we lift our prayers for those who cannot get to their church and all those in harm’s way.

On a personal note, I was in Santa Rosa two years ago when wildfires killed 44 people. It is heartbreaking and mind-numbing to see this again in the North Bay.

Our bishop has asked us to pray with this particular prayer: “O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray you, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Turning to our gospel lesson this morning, imagine this scene: Two men are in their place of worship, a place like here.

The first man does everything right. He prays, he volunteers, he is always pious. He is every pastor’s dream candidate for the Vestry, or so he appears.

Then we have this other man. He has messed up a lot of things in life. He is not proud of himself. Something inside him compels him to come to worship.

But this second man keeps to himself off in a corner.

This second man prays for mercy. He prays for hope and forgiveness. He knows he does not have all the answers, but he keeps asking and praying.

The first man, the pious man, keeps his eyes on the second man. The first man congratulates himself that he is not like this other man.

He reminds God how fortunate God is to have him as a worshipper.

The first man does everything right. He knows all the rules – when to stand, when to kneel. But that’s on the surface. He really doesn’t let God, or anyone else, get close to him.
In fact, he isn’t paying attention to God at all. He’s watching the other
guy. He’s made his spiritual life into a competition.
As Jesus tells this parable we hear this morning, he points us to the
second man, the tax collector, the sinner — the guy who has messed
everything up — because this second man stands-in for anyone who
struggles with life, has made mistakes, and doesn’t have all the answers.
This first man is a Pharisee, but that is not the issue. Pharisees really
are good people.
They’ve gotten a bad rap in modern times as being hide-bound rule
keepers, but in fact, the Pharisees reinvigorated Jewish spirituality, bringing
it out of the Temple in Jerusalem and into the homes.
The Pharisees believe in the Resurrection, an there is nothing wrong
with being a Pharisee. In fact, Saint Paul is a Pharisee, and proudly so.
The issue here is not about being a Pharisee, or any other religion. The
issue is our inner life and how our inner life guides our outer life.
The second man is someone who is shunned because he is a tax
collector. This is not just some bureaucrat, but a Jewish collaborator with the
Roman occupiers.
He is a shakedown artist. He collects taxes for the hated Romans and
skims off money for himself.
So, when Jesus tells this story, you can imagine the anger swelling up
in his listeners as they realize he is holding up the tax collector as a paragon
of virtue.
Some probably walk off in disgust. It is statements like this that gets
Jesus killed.
Yet Jesus makes the point over and over that our outward appearances
can be deceptive. It is what goes on here that counts. And what goes on here
comes out in how we live and how we act.
The second man, the crooked tax collector, empties himself before
God. He spills his guts. By being truthful about himself, he can truly
discover the faith that will bring him healing.
His heart is open and that makes him open to turning his life around.
The heart of faith is about trusting that God is somehow in this messy
existence we call life, nudging us along even when we don’t see where we
are going.
Faith is about finding the strength within ourselves to take the first
step — and the second step, and the next after that.
Faith is not an achievement. Faith is not a competition. Faith is not a
game with a score at the end of the game.
Nor is faith about having all the answers. Rather, faith is a gift from God to be discovered and nurtured.

Faith is ours to explore, to live into, each in our own unique way, and to experience together in this community where we can hold each other up, and treat each other with compassion and respect.

But sometimes we are so busy, or so immersed in our struggles, or so caught up in our own self-deceptions, that we do not notice the faith already within us — this precious gift from God that comes our way every day.

My friends, being alive is a miracle. Each and every one of us is God’s miracle. How many of us begin our day by simply giving thanks for the gift of being alive?

That is the beginning of faith.

And faith is about living into the hope that the resurrection of Jesus, the anointed One of God, includes us — and not because we are more faithful, or holier-than-thou, or follow more rules than anyone else, but because we are God’s creation and God loves us and made us good.

The sinful tax collector in the parable never gives up hope – hope that no matter how low he sinks, God is with him and his can change. He gives thanks for being alive.

We don’t know what happens next to the Pharisee or the tax collector. Jesus doesn’t tell us. He leaves this story open-ended for us to fill in the blanks with our own life.

One final thought: Over the many centuries, many have filled in the rest of the story, among them Saint Paul, who never met Jesus but devoted his life to following him.

For Saint Paul there are three words that embody how to live as the people of God, and these three words are embedded in the opening prayer we hear this morning:

Faith, hope, and charity.

The word “charity” is an English translation of the Greek word *agape*, which would be better translated as “selfless love.”

Faith, hope and selfless love.

It is with this mark of selfless love that we, too, can live into the promise of faith. Our selfless love comes not because we are obligated like the pious man in the parable. Rather, our selfless love stems from the joy of gratitude, and the joy of our heart, and the very soil of our soul.

And so today, and every day, let us pray that our gifts of faith, hope and love, will be boundless, and that we may each continue to live by our giving to each other and to the world. Amen.