

Pentecost 20

Sermon 10.23.22

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“Well, thank the good Lord I didn’t do THAT!” Or...

“Lord, I thank you that I am not homeless like that woman.” And my all-time favorite,

“There but for the grace of God go I.”

It’s sure easy to see arrogance in others, isn’t it? And this morning we’ve got yet another Pharisee, giving us a pretty stark example. But do we recognize arrogance in ourselves?

In this section of Luke, Jesus uses parables to teach us how to pray. Last week we heard the parable of the widow and the judge, with the moral that we must pray persistently. We know that God is our constant companion, right? It follows, then, that by our thoughts, words and deeds we show and tell Jesus who we are, who we mean to be as Christians. What if every waking moment is a form of prayer?

Today we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which teaches us to pray humbly.

Humility is a tricky thing, though. The way these short verses read, you might be thinking it’s easy to see what’s wrong with the Pharisee’s thinking. Certainly, we’ve spoken before about how the Pharisees get a bad rap in the New Testament. Yet they were the law abiders, the rule-keepers. They worked hard to preserve the Torah and to keep oral traditions of the Jewish faith. It’s partly thanks to the Pharisees that the Old Testament was well-preserved despite multiple attempts to wipe out the Jewish religion!

They were strict interpreters of Mosaic law, and they developed intricate interpretations of simple concepts, setting themselves apart from neighbors who were less strict in their doctrine.

And we learn that the Pharisee went above and beyond the tradition of the day. He fasted, not just on the Day of Atonement, but twice a week! He tithed not just a percentage of his field crops but a tenth of all his income. The herb garden, the oil stores, all of those little details add up, and he was clearly generous with his wealth.

By contrast, meet the tax collector. We know that tax collectors in Biblical times were not the pencil-pushing government bureaucrats that we stereotype today. Instead, they were universally reviled, sell-outs to the Roman government. They were required to amass a pile of money from ordinary people, and used extortion to line their own pockets above and beyond that quota. The tax collector, too, is isolated. It’s unlikely he shows up daily for prayer, one imagines he’s never fasted in his life and his allegiance to lining his own pockets takes priority over tithing to the church.

One would think on the surface that with all those points the Pharisee has amassed, he would have the keys to the kingdom of God. One would think that the tax collector, all tax collectors in those days, would burn in hell.

And that’s the trouble with making judgments based on stereotypes. That’s the inherent problem with humans judging at all. As Jesus states in our reading: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Pharisee lives in his own little bubble of self-righteousness. He has named and categorized the enemy. He has set himself apart, declaring himself nearer to God because he has checked all the right boxes. He really doesn't need to pray, because he's already better than he needs to be. He's not like those thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even the tax collector. What a very low bar he sets in his comparison!

By contrast, the tax collector finds himself in the temple, a place with which he's probably not very familiar. Surely others are whispering about him. Maybe they'll call him out. Maybe they'll spit on him. But his attention isn't on his fellow humans; it's, rightfully, on God: Have mercy on me, a sinner!

The parable today directs us to pray to God, not to ourselves. When we say, "there but for the grace of God go I," we not only sit in judgment of another of God's children, we accept ourselves as good enough while the person we're judging is...not. Who are we praying to, anyway?

And yes, when we say, "thank God I'm not like the Pharisee," we put ourselves squarely in that company of judgment. Oops. That's a bit of a conundrum, because by pointing all this out, I've been judging the Pharisee and finding him wanting, just as I've warned us all not to do.

Our society is full of land mines where we naturally compare ourselves to others. But in prayer, we are not competing against anyone. We are all sinners, every last one of us, from the bishop to the deacon to the occasional church attendee who disrupts the service to the homeless person who sleeps on our steps. We are all equal in our need to pray to God for mercy.

So: How to pray? It doesn't take fancy words, it doesn't require that we check any boxes. It doesn't require a prayer book or a kneeler or a knowledge of Episcopal tradition.

The good news is that our Pharisee wasn't struck by lightning on the way home from the temple. At the same time, our tax collector didn't suddenly quit his job and give his money away to the poor. Yes, the tax collector went down to his home justified, while the Pharisee was not. The parable shows us that justification, righteousness is not ours to give ourselves. These are gifts from God. But another point we can take home is that Jesus isn't asking for perfection here. Prayer takes practice, and as one of my son's soccer coaches used to say, practice doesn't make perfect, it makes permanent.

Returning to my opening premise. We know that God is our constant companion. By our thoughts, words and deeds we show and tell Jesus who we are, who we mean to be as Christians. In every thought, word and deed, are we contrite? Are we compassionate? Are we praying because we need to check a box, or are we praying because we need God?

"God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Amen