**“The ‘Right’ Way to Pray”**

**A sermon given by the Rev. Rachel Wildman**

**October 23, 2016**

***Luke 18:9-14***

*Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, `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.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, `God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

So, as the child of a pastoral counselor and two clinical social workers, I usually rank pretty high on self-awareness. And yet, I am certain that Jesus enjoyed a completely smug “gotcha!” moment with me over this parable. Do you know what my first thought was as I read it? You all do…Yup, this supposedly steeped-in the Gospel, formed by the tradion, *priest’s* first thought was, “Man, thank God I am not like the Pharisee!”

For an entire day as it swirled around in my mind, I could not see anything to preach on—the congregation and I don’t pray like the Pharisee, I thought. We are not some hoity-toity parish who tolerate co-existing next to those we feel aren’t nearly as enlightened as we are. So, what is there to do except congratulate ourselves and move on to the Creed, right? Shortest homily ever.

And then, Jesus did a little Back to the Future McFly knock on my head, “Hello…Hello…Anyone home??” and I could see that perhaps this parable did have quite a bit to say to me, and hopefully, to each of us.

It seems from the surface of the parable that the tax-collector wins—he’s the one we are supposed to model ourselves after. However, some scholars make a strong case that this may be what *Luke* wanted us to take away from this parable, not what *Jesus* wanted us to take away.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Biblical scholarship suggests that the whole set-up “Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt,” and the interpretation at the end, “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted," are likely not authentic to Jesus, but rather, were added by Luke as part of the particular narrative he is trying to set up. If we take those beginning and ending parts out, all we have is this:

*"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, `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.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, `God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'”*

Heard this way, it is quite likely that both the Pharisee and the tax-collector are held up by Jesus as two extreme caricatures of religious folk, EACH to be avoided when coming to God in prayer.[[2]](#footnote-2) Just as we are not to use prayer to further our own contempt for others, we are also not to alienate ourselves from God—distancing ourselves by remaining far off.

I have to admit it was really challenging to me to realize that even the tax-collector received harsh critique from Jesus. The sort of prayer the tax-collector offers seems to me such an intimate, vulnerable prayer—his own body manifesting his degree of self-loathing. Prayer for us, too, is so often a similarly vulnerable, intimate thing. In our common prayer we *might* have the luxury of some cover, but in our personal prayer, where we are often so fragile, how challenging for us to hear that there is such a substantial possibility of doing it wrong. For me, who now sees myself in both of these men, it’s threatening, and somewhat defeating.

PAUSE

So, how are we supposed to pray? Jesus doesn’t give an example of the right way in this parable, only multiple examples of wrong ways.

As I have sat with my sense of defeat, and done a good deal of reading these past many days, I have come to see that there is something that connects the prayers of these two men—a common thread at the heart of what Jesus may want for us in prayer.

The tax-collector, although he asks for mercy, clearly doesn’t fully trust the readiness of God’s forgiveness.[[3]](#footnote-3) He is too afraid to even show God his face—much against the common Jewish prayer practice of the time of coming to prayer head-up, open to God. His whole body—positioned for protection--belies his belief that God’s forgiveness isn’t radical enough to forgive even him.

Well, and the Pharisee…he, too, seems convinced that God would never forgive someone as sinful as the tax-collector. This is at the heart of his prayer of thanksgiving—“thank you for not making me like him, for all hope would be lost if I were *him*—surely with the way he is just bathed in sin, you would never allow him into the fullness of life and love you’ve set for me.”

I have come to think it is this attitude, shared by both the Pharisee and the tax-collector, that Jesus is labeling as wrong. What Jesus wants for each of us is the grounding of our prayer in our own certitude of God’s radical, liberating forgiveness—our petitions and expectations formed around the knowledge that God will, EVERY SINGLE TIME for EVERY SINGLE CIRCUMSTANCE, radically forgive US, and the “Others” around us.

Think of the Pharisee and the tax-collector…standing so far apart from each other, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually. Their lives never to meet because neither of them can trust in God’s radical forgiveness, and in the possibilities for new life that forgiveness opens up.

What if the Pharisee looked on the tax-collector with the full expectation that God would forgive him—that God already had?

An imaginary rope would appear between the two men, reeling the Pharisee toward the tax--collector—the Pharisee’s conviction of God’s forgiveness so strong that his mission now would be to draw near to the tax-collector and do all the could to convince him of his worth and potential.

And what if the tax-collector came to God, arms wide, eyes up to heaven, opening himself to the healing power of being completely and radically forgiven?

He now would not cower far off, but would walk right up to the Pharisee, lock eyes, and the two would join in their common prayer for each other, their community, and the world.

PAUSE

When our prayer is grounded in an unwavering conviction that God is radically forgiving, of ourselves and others, barriers between us all are blown apart.

If everyone’s focus was dominated by the conviction that we are all forgiven, what fear would there be? The MO of all those around us would be to convince us of our forgiven-ness. Oh, how much more we would all attempt to do, no longer fearing doing something wrong!

How much more energy would be restored to each of us if our burning passion was to forgive, rather than to keep a mental count of how many times we had been wronged! All these things that act in so many small ways each day to separate us from each other…all the hesitations..would be gone!

The call from Jesus to ground our prayer in the unwavering expectation of God’s radical forgiveness of ourselves and others has substantial implications for the close, comfortable relationships we already have. It has perhaps even greater implications for those relationships we have yet to build—relationships across race and class…across cultures and religious traditions…relationships *even* across political parties.

I told Michael I was going to preach on the value of humility…so he chose many of the hymns as such….I worried that that had altered a bit in these intervening days after Jesus McFlied me—but perhaps not. The word Humble actually comes from the latin for ground. And indeed, for me and I hope now for many of you, the Gospel today is not a call to enumerate all of the possible wrong ways we pray. The liberating Good News today, is that we are to come to prayer GROUNDED—humbled—in the radical forgiveness of God.

May it be always so. AMEN.

1. Downing, F. Gerald. “The Ambiguity of ‘The Pharisee and the Toll-collector’ (Luke 18:9-14) in the Greco-Roman World of Late Antiquity,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly,* Vol 52., 1992, p. 80-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is Downing’s primary thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Downing’s thesis expounded is that both the Pharisee and the Tax-collector fail to do a number of things in prayer, including trusting that God will forgive. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)