

Luke 18: 9-14 “Pride and Presumptuousness”

On their journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus continues to teach through parables. Last week, we listened to the parable that comes right before today’s story. Jesus told it to teach them the need to pray always and not to lose heart, and it was a story of a widow, someone who was in great need but had little power or support, and how she kept asking the judge to grant her justice. If she’s an example of what a persistent prayer looks like, we know it because of her action.

I also mentioned that parable had a twin parable we heard earlier in the summer: the parable of a shameless neighbor, who went to his neighbor for loaves of bread for a friend who showed up at his door. He did not have anything to offer to this friend, so he would bother his neighbor until he got what he needed for his friend. Again, we are shown what a persistent prayer looks like in action.

From these parables, we learned that prayer shows up in the way we live. How we pray impacts how we live and vice versa. So, in today’s parable, Jesus turns our attention to what could be happening in our hearts when we pray and invites us to reflect on our own prayer lives. By going deeper into this story, we may find a way of praying that would break us open to God’s redeeming and healing presence in our lives.

As parables often are, this story appears to be pretty simple on the surface with familiar characters and here is a word of caution. By now we’ve seen the Pharisees depicted pretty consistently in a negative light, so we might have grown a bit prejudiced against them; they were the ones who would challenge or try to trick Jesus, watching him closely for an opportunity to prove him wrong or criticize him for breaking the Law.

But not all Pharisees were conceited hypocrites. To the community of the Jews in Jesus’s time, the Pharisees were not known as villains. They were devoted

to interpreting the Law God gave them through Moses and to applying them to every aspect of life. In general, they were respected and highly regarded, and there were Pharisees who listened to Jesus's teachings and followed him, including Apostle Paul. So, to hear this parable as Jesus's original listeners did, we need to remember Pharisees were respectable people --- like you and I are, or at least try to be.

Then there's the tax collector. From the Gospel stories, we know Jesus hung out and ate with them, along with other sinners, and whenever the Pharisees snub tax collectors, which seem to be all the time, we've come to feel sympathetic towards them, or am I the only one? Don't you almost feel warm and fuzzy when we see a tax collector appear in a story, because we know Jesus loved them and came to save them? So, we are not shocked or offended, are we, when this story presents a Pharisee as a bad example and a tax collector as a good example. But that's not what Jesus's original audience expected.

We need to remember, tax collectors were traitors who ripped you off to fatten their own pockets while working for your oppressor, the Roman government. If anyone was to go back home after praying at the temple justified, "vindicated," or considered blameless, it could not be a tax collector. They were the ones who made your life unnecessarily difficult; they were unfair and abusive; they were known for their utterly selfish living. No, we don't want to romanticize tax collectors. Think "despicable."

Jesus was telling this parable to people who felt confident of their own righteousness, their good standing with God, and looked down on others. Though Jesus had characterized some Pharisees as such, Luke doesn't say he was talking to the Pharisees here. Jesus is talking to anyone who are pretty satisfied with their own conduct and felt they "got right with the Lord" because of it.

Jesus first shows us what God hears in this Pharisee's prayer, for God sees what's in our hearts. "The Pharisee, standing by himself, thus prayed" is how it says in the translation I read, but interestingly, the original Greek bible reads "he stood toward himself and prayed." Another English translation captures this sense of preoccupation with self: "He stood up and prayed about himself," and I would add "to himself."

And that's what he did. He starts with "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people who do bad things, like this tax collector." How he begins his prayer reflects his understanding of God's role in his life: his cheerleader. Then he goes on to list the commendable things he's done, as if to remind God of them. And what he's done, whether it's fasting or tithing, is well beyond what the Law required; it's an overkill of good deeds, done not out of compassion but to feed his sense of his own righteousness.

He is full of pride and presumptuousness. He is so full of himself that there is no room left for God's grace to enter in. He is reassuring himself with the abundance of good deeds he's done. Totally self-reliant even in his prayer, he acknowledges no need for God. He had come to the Temple, to the House of God to pray, but praying to himself, he left God out in the cold.

If he keeps at it, maybe someday, he'd be so full of himself that he would either burst or crack, and who would be picking up the pieces to put him back together again? Our merciful and forgiving God. Then, he might come to know the healing touch of God's tender hands. It's a hard way to realize our need for God, though.

In our culture, self-reliance, independence, and individual achievement are so overrated and oversold that we need not be an arrogant overconfident Pharisee to fall into this trap of self-sufficiency. It's a hard one to detect within ourselves, because it looks awfully like a virtue.

Even if one is not religious or a praying type, we are constantly assessing ourselves and looking for affirmation and validation, often in the wrong places and by the wrong measures. And for some of us, the trap of ‘pride and presumptuousness’ comes in a more subtle form of false humility. When affirmation and validation of our gifts, or sincere appreciation for the work we have done come our way, we resist them and are quick to renounce them. Shortly after I arrived in this community, I was being showered with gracious words of affirmation and appreciation, sincerely shared. To such sign of acceptance, my response was “Oh, No, it’s not Me; it’s you! You guys must have in your DNA to be so welcoming and appreciative!” Instead of humbly accepting these kind words with thanks. A small voice whispers into our ears saying we are not worthy. Such renunciation is a false humility, because it is not of God; rather, it is of our fear of appearing “proud and presumptuous.” It’s just a flip side of the same coin.

Then Jesus shows us what’s in the heart of the miserable wretch of a tax collector. While the Pharisee stood and turned to himself to pray, this tax collector stood far off, as if he knew how unworthy he was, because of what he had done. But a sense of desperation and remorse brought him to the House of God.

When offering a prayer of petition, that is, a prayer asking God for something, the custom posture was to turn one’s eyes to heaven with hands raised. But Jesus says this tax collector would not even look up to heaven, and instead of raising his hands, he was beating into his chest, as he asked God to have mercy on him.

He, too, was full of himself, but what he was full of was his remorse, regret, shame, for he knew what he had done was evil in God’s eyes. And so he humbled himself in the sight of the Lord.

The feeling of “regret” is the most bitter taste I know, because there is nothing I can do to “undo” the regrettable things I’ve done. All I can say is “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” God, have mercy, and somehow make right of the mess I’ve created. It is a heavy burden to live with the knowledge of one’s guilt, a burden heavy enough to crack our self-reliant shell of self open.

For this tax collector, his realization and acknowledgement of his fault and the limit of his own ability to make things right, made him turn to God, creating an opening where God’s Spirit could enter in, with healing on its wings. He knows he is broken, and he has broken the relationship with God and with others. And that realization led him to pray with a contrite heart. And Jesus says, with that prayer, he was justified, vindicated, made right. He is freed from the burden of regret.

In Leonard Cohen’s song called Anthem, there is a line that says “Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.”

A prayer that looks deeply and honestly into our own hearts transforms our lives, because it is there we are met and held by God. So, the psalmist prays “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.” (“Psalm 139:24”)

God does not want our “pride and presumptuousness” to keep us from turning to God, nor is it God’s desire that we be crushed daily by the weight of our guilt or the feeling of unworthiness. God invites us to show up to God as we are, cracks and all, so that God’s light can enter in and we are justified, made whole again. And that’s a prayer.

Thanks be to God.