

Luke 18:9-14

Oct. 27, 2019

“Thanks but no thanks”

Our Scripture focus on prayers of thanksgiving seems timely, just a few weeks (‘eeks?) before our national Thanksgiving.

Hearing today’s Gospel, did anyone think, ‘*thank God I am not the Pharisee or the tax collector*’?

Today’s parable features a self-righteous Pharisee and a tax collector whose very profession engenders contempt. Last week’s parable was about the unjust judge and the pugnacious widow. None of these characters are portrayed in a flattering light. There is something about each of them that leads us to say, ‘thank God, that’s not me.’

Parables have many points of entry; often we place ourselves in the parable to gain understanding and context. Particularly when the characters are off-putting, that’s a problem, because we prefer to think better of ourselves.

In today’s Gospel, the person of low social rank offers a model of prayer and the religious figure the polar opposite. We might want to hide out in the listening crowd.

Luke says “ [*Jesus*] *told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*” Would that be us? Are any of us feeling at least a little bit self-satisfied, knowing that some in our congregation (and probably our adult children) are having their second cup of coffee and watching the Seahawks, rather than worshipping today?

Today’s parable about prayer and spiritual pride is about all of us.

Prayers are a window into our spirituality. Into our values and fears. Into our assumptions and prejudices, into our judgmental self. Our prayers reveal our focus – self-centered or other-centered – the whole of our commitments and behavior.

A Lutheran pastor tells about her five year old niece at a family dinner.

My niece refused to offer a memorized table grace. She insisted that she be allowed to pray extemporaneously for that specific meal. With hands folded, head bowed, and one eye scanning the table, she prayed, “Thank you, God, that Mom mashed potatoes and made gravy. Thank you, God, that there are enough rolls for me to have two. I don’t thank you, God, for the beans.” Amen. JoAnn Post, Christiancentury.org/article/living-word/October-27

I can identify with that prayer – *Thanks for giving me what I want, and no thanks for the rest.* We

all have experiences or concerns that are, for us, like those green beans. Like when I got the flu from the flu immunization shot, or the dishwasher stopped working just before my dinner guests arrived.

So we get it — *thanks, but no thanks*. Which is pretty much what the Pharisee prays.

A Pharisee was a religious person, a spiritual leader highly regarded among his fellow Jews. He was expected to be carefully observant of the law, and generous with his money. In his prayer of thanks, the Pharisee of the parable claims all of this goodness as his own. Then he says,

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people. Like the tax collector. Really, thank you, God.” Well, that’s honest, anyway. He is not like the tax collector.

We delude ourselves from time to time that we are both ‘good and better than’. We make a brief observation of the other, a comparison, and then – we slip into judgment. Judgment of those people who do not meet *our* expectations, our commitments, or our theological convictions. Even when we do not know them, if they look or dress differently, or because of their profession. We sometimes get angry when others do not seem to appreciate or give us enough credit and instead of humility we turn to self-promotion’. A nuance of that ‘good and better than’ thinking is an assumption that those at the bottom of the social ladder want to be like us! We can see all of that in the Pharisee’s prayer.

The Pharisee’s public prayer is a prayer of self-promotion. He acts like the Pharisees to whom Jesus refers in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt.6, “the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues on street corners.’ Although he *seems to seek* nothing for himself, pretty clearly the Pharisee wants – and expects – God’s appreciative attention. The Pharisee is “right with himself”, he is *self*-justified. But, as Jesus tells us, this Pharisee is not justified with God.

A few words about the meaning of justified in this context: it is God who redeems. We do not obtain ‘justification’ by doing things, even good things like prayer or charitable giving, although these things are an essential part of our commitment to Christian living. Being in just relationship with God is not *achieved* by us at all; it comes through God’s reaching out in mercy to us.

In the 1st century, a tax collector was identified with Rome. The Roman tax collector collected whatever he could as “tax”; then he turned over a set amount to Rome, and kept whatever more he collected as his wage or profit. That’s how he earned his living; the Romans did not pay him. The tax collector was assumed to exploit, to accept bribes; he was a collaborator with the oppressors, and routinely despised. One did not need to know him to know ‘*who he is.*’

The tax collector comes to the temple to pray just like the Pharisee – not a place we expect to find a tax collector. More, this tax collector is contrite, remorseful; he humbles himself and asks for mercy, for he knows that only God brings salvation.

The Pharisee and the tax collector behave contrary to our assumptions about them – and contrary to the assumptions of the crowd listening to Jesus speak. That, in itself, should bring us up short. About our assumptions.

If the Pharisee were true to our assumptions about ‘who he is’ as a religious leader (and his own self assessment!), shouldn’t he pray *for* the tax collector? Instead, the Pharisee is thankful he is not like that, he – the Pharisee – is not in need of God’s forgiveness and mercy.

The tax collector has come to pray at the temple and ask for mercy. Is that not worth celebrating? A spiritual step forward for someone who collaborates with the Romans?

Might the Pharisee at least be grateful that *someone* collects the taxes to pacify the oppressors, a ‘necessary evil’ under Roman rule?

Would we rejoice if someone known as ‘a bad actor’ or thief came to church and joined in our public prayer? We welcome all, right? Sinners included. Especially sinners. We confess together that we have denied God’s goodness in each other, in ourselves and in the world God has created. We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf.

We do not proclaim that we individually or as Church, are *not* in need of forgiveness; nor do we make our confession *on behalf of* those others who *are* sinners. No. We ask forgiveness for ourselves.

We have opportunity to see ourselves clearly in that moment of silence before we begin our public confession.

We are all sinners, together. Still, sometimes it seems we are more interested in hearing the details about the particular sins of others. Witness the popularity daily news feeds. Hearing about the sins of others....well, there we are, back at judgment. Assumptions. Our sense of our own ‘good and better than.’

What if the Pharisee regarded the tax collector, thieves, adulterers, as *neighbors* whom the law required him to love? While bragging about how right he thinks is with God, he forgets both love of neighbor and humility.

What if the tax collector cried out, *Thank you God that I am not a hypocrite like that Pharisee?* Would that make him just like the Pharisee? He doesn’t, of course. He puts himself at God’s mercy, offering no excuse.

Honesty about ourselves in our conversation with God is a good beginning. Contrition is only a first step, though. After we confess our unworthiness, then what?

How do we move from remorse to action, from guilt to seeking justice for our neighbors?

In all likelihood, the tax collector went back to his profession – I doubt there was a job retraining school for tax collectors and possibly no opportunity to feed his family a different way. I like to imagine that he offered restitution to those from whom he had gathered taxes unfairly, as the tax collector Zacchaeus does after meeting Jesus in Luke 19:

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Luke 19:8

Compare Paul’s prayer in the letter to Timothy. Paul is near the end of his life. He waits in prison, anticipating a violent death. *“The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith...the Lord stood by me and gave me strength.”*

Paul does not write about *winning* the race, nor claim success. Paul faces death and does not seek to avoid it. Paul is humble before God.

He begins with a bittersweet reflection that all deserted him – Paul doesn’t like green beans either– and leans into his prayer that their rejection not be counted against them. *“For the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom.”* Even in the face of suffering and impending death, Paul is confident of a place in the kingdom. He trusts in God’s mercy, and offers no excuses for how he has lived his life. He does not count his own goodness. Paul glorifies God who *“stood by me and gave me strength.”*

Jesus warns about spiritual pride. The challenge for the Pharisee and the tax collector – and us – is to converse with God with authentic self-reflection, not self-promotion. And without judgment.

Listen to the bite of truth about yourself. Stand before God without excuse. Let go of spiritual pride and be humble in prayer and life.

Where do you find yourself in this parable? Are you the Pharisee or the tax collector, or someone in the crowd?

Amen.

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