

“Approach to Prayer”

Luke 18:9-14

28 October 2007

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He also 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.”

Prayer.

Our Gospel for this morning comes on the tails of last Sunday's narrative from Luke about the persistent widow and the unjust judge. The Savior's message last week was to “pray always and not to lose heart.” It answered the question of “when?” When do we pray?

Today, Jesus moves us forward in his discussion about prayer, and he does so with another parable, of a Pharisee and a tax collector. This Gospel snippet addresses the question of “how?” How are we to pray?

It is interesting that the Lukan editors precede this parable with a statement about Jesus' intended audience. “He also told this parable,” in regards to this being the second of two consecutive parables on the similar topic of prayer, “*to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*”¹

The self-righteous do not need the righteousness of God. They do not need God's love. They need not ask for mercy. They want nothing from God. Perhaps they want nothing of God.²

In the time of Jesus, the self-righteous were the religious authorities and the Roman occupiers. The Roman occupiers believed themselves to be instruments of Caesar, the divine Emperor. Their work, no matter how brutal or violent was a self-righteous expression of a dominant, superior, and apparently unbeatable race.

1 Luke 18:9 NRSV

2 John F. Kavanaugh, S.J., as found at: http://liturgy.slu.edu/300rdC102807/theword_engaged.html

The religious authorities included both lay and clergy, both Pharisee and Priest. They had developed a punitive system of guilt, based upon God's good law, that had been perverted to assure wealth and power to the few, burdened upon the backs of the masses.

If we are to believe that Jesus is speaking to us today, we must ask the question, Who are the self-righteous who trust in themselves? It might be easy to draw a similar conclusion, that Jesus is addressing government and organized religion today, but, I'm not going to let us off the hook so easily. Yes, government is all about power and money, command and control, dominate statements such as "we are the policemen for the world" and "democracy is the solution to every problem." Yes, government reeks of self-righteousness and a failure to trust in God. It is so much easier to trust in the sixth fleet or the first infantry division.

Yes, organized religion bears an equal amount of responsibility for being self-righteousness and trusting only in itself. Until we confess our self-righteous behavior, and make corrective efforts, the worlds perception will be reinforced that a life of faith has more to do with terrorism and fundamentalism than it does with peace, love, and forgiveness ... no matter if we are Christian, Muslim, Jew, or of another faith. It is so much easier to trust in history and tradition, in the Book of Discipline, the Book of Common Prayer, or Canon Law.

Let me get uncomfortably personal for a moment: could Jesus be speaking to you and me at an individual level? Is he telling us this parable this morning because he has reason to believe that we might be the offenders? The self-righteous? The ones who don't truly trust in God, but only in our own accumulated resources?

When that pay check is coming, the bills are paid, and we are putting up bigger and bigger barns, just because we can, our ethos of prosperity makes us forgetful of ... in whom we should place our trust?

This audience for this parable is further refined by the Lukan redactors: it is for those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous ... *and regarded others with contempt.*

The self-righteous spend their lives in comparison. Who is better, who is worse, who is first? And those who do not measure up to their canons of success are deemed unworthy.³ Comparison is more than competition. Comparison is the breeding ground for discrimination, hatred, and bias. Regarding others as less than ourselves is stealing the prerogative of judgment away for Christ and claiming it for ourselves. We usurp God's authority and place ourself in the judge and jury's seat. Whoa, this is a dangerous road to travel.

This parable outlines an approach to God that speaks to the heart of prayer. We've already been identified as being like the Pharisee ... at many levels; nation, church, and self. So lets take a closer look at the hapless tax collector, who stood far off, who wouldn't even look up

3 John F. Kavanaugh, S.J., as found at: http://liturgy.slu.edu/300rdC102807/theword_engaged.html

to heaven, was beating his chest saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Here is a man who engages in state sponsored and endorsed lying and cheating to make his living. He takes advantage of the poor and the most vulnerable. He collaborates with the occupying enemy, no less. He is the focus of the Pharisee's comparative scorn.

This parable isn't to call disciples of Jesus to behave like this tax collector prior to his entrance into the Temple. Jesus isn't asking us to lie, cheat, or steal. Rather, this parable is a call to disciples of Christ that we are to be more like this tax collector once he has entered the Temple and has begun to pray.

He prays to God, "be merciful to me, a sinner."

He comes to the Temple and stands far off, in a position of humility. He recognizes his dependence upon God when he petitions the divine to "be merciful to me." He humbly acknowledges his status and identity when he states "to me a sinner."

The result is that the tax collector's humility draws him closer to God and allows him to go home justified. It isn't us Pharisees who are justified. It is the lowly, humble, penitent tax collector.

One of Luke's favorite themes is to highlight the occasions when Jesus pulls a reversal of fortunes. The Pharisee exceeds the requirements of the Law. He is expected to be the good guy. The tax collector in Jesus' day had little virtue - religious, moral, or social - a public sinner.

We think we know which each deserves, but Jesus turns our expectations upside down. Neither gets what they deserves. That's the point!

Luke must have been down right jubilant when this passage was transferred from the oral to the written tradition.

The point is that God's mercy is not owed, or earned by anyone. Its very essence is grace- a gift given by God to the one who asks for it, no matter how sinful or dire the circumstances may be.⁴

This is a painful lesson to be learned by many who follow Jesus. The whole premise of salvation by grace through faith turns the self-righteous on their heads.

"Well, what are we working so hard for?" We grumble as we peel our bushes of squash and

4 Zimmerman, J., Greisen, T., Harmon, K., Leclerc, T., Living Liturgy: Spirituality, Celebration, and Catechesis for Sundays and Solemnities, Year C - 2007, Liturgical Press, St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, p. 235.

potatoes. “If all this church stuff isn’t earning me anything, then why bother?”

We work because we follow in the example of Jesus. As he reached out to the poor, the broken, the last, and the least, so too should we, with acts of mercy, kindness, and generosity.

We work because it puts us into the prayerful position of humility, the approach to prayer that comes from the back of the sanctuary, not from the pulpit, that speaks directly to God and asks for mercy, that recognizes the fact that, “yes, it is true. I am a sinner.”

On this Red Ribbon Sunday, we work and speak, we petition and pray, to keep our kids free from drug and alcohol addictions. It is so easy to condemn the addict, to look down our nose at those who seemingly have little self control.

But, in a way, when we look at Red Ribbon through the lens of our Gospel lesson for this morning, I can’t help but think that perhaps the worst addiction of all is when we become addicted to our own self ... our pride, our ego, our status, and self-accomplishments. Jesus may be speaking to us to turn our expectations upside down, to take a good look at the one who is finally broken and humbled, who asks God for help. Perhaps we are being called to be like that guy, to be like that woman, who can honestly say, “yes, it is true. I am a sinner.”

All who exalt themselves will be humbled; all who humble themselves will be exalted. Amen.

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