

The Pharisee and the Publican

Luke 18:9-14

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 27) 2019

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There are some people who do not wear well with time. The first time we met them we were impressed. We liked them. But upon multiple meetings over time, they begin to wear thin. Maybe it was because we discovered something about them we didn't notice at first. We learned something new about them that grated on us or was irritating. But a lot of the time it was not something new we discovered but because of something that got old. At first, we liked his or her witty conversation with quotes from T.S. Eliot but after repeated meetings we discovered the same quotes from Eliot were the only ones he or she knew. Or they told the same old joke over and over and laughed at their own punch line over and over. Or maybe they told the same story time and time again (Ouch!). There are some folks that over time, we grow weary of seeing.

For me this is true of the Pharisee and the Publican. The lectionary brings them back every three years and after forty years, I cringe. "Oh no, here they come again – same old Pharisee and same old Publican. I have to listen to the same old prayers. I'd like to hear something new from them. I'd like to see them change."

Part of why these two get on my nerves is that I know them so well. Not just from forty years of preaching but because Jesus shows us two people who cut too close for comfort. We know these two people. We see them often and we know that at one time or another we are the Pharisee or sometimes we are the Publican. No wonder they bother me.

We pick up Luke this week where we ended last week when Jesus told the Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge about learning to persist in prayer. Learning to stick with it instead of just a little, quick prayer when we're in trouble and another quick little prayer the next time we're in trouble. The religious leaders, the Pharisees do not like what they are hearing from Jesus and then Jesus turns around and tells this parable.

Two people go up to the Temple to pray, one of whom is a Pharisee. There is nothing new here because we expect to see him in the Temple. What is strange is that the other person is a tax collector or Publican. Tax collecting was one of the occupations forbidden to Jews. Tax collectors were viewed as ritually impure and corrupt. In a country exploited through widespread corrupt taxation, they were highly unpopular. The paradox in the parable lies in the fact that someone viewed so negatively by the established religion and the people should be the one "justified" or accepted by God for his prayer. The other half of the paradox is that someone viewed positively by the people, the Pharisee, should behave in a blatantly self-righteous manner.

Before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the Pharisaic way of life was practiced out in the villages in the synagogues. The common people liked the Pharisees because they took Jewish tradition and the Torah seriously and tried to interpret and live them in ways that touched daily life.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E, when the institutions of Jewish life were destroyed by Roman violence, the Pharisaic tradition of teaching and living was a force that enabled the survival of the people. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the local synagogue was all that was left. To this day,

Judaism is rooted in a Pharisaic understanding of faith, centered on the study of the Torah.

Pharisees were considered good guys. They were progressive, educated in the Torah, believed in reform and change. Their adversaries were Rome, Roman collaborators – like the tax collectors, and the religious conservatives known as the Sadducees. The listeners of Jesus' day would have expected the Pharisee to be a careful observer of the Law, in keeping with their generally high view of the Pharisaic movement. On the other hand, they would not expect the tax collector to go to the Temple at all. The parable serves up two behaviors that are out of character: that the Pharisee prays in a self-righteous manner, and the tax collector prays at all!

The contrast between the two prayers is impossible to miss. The Pharisee stands apart, probably so that his litany of virtues can be heard by other worshipers and by the tax collector. The Pharisee's prayer keeps the focus on himself. It is "I" this and "I" that. He is full of himself and his virtues.

"Oh God, thank you that I'm not like those other Baptists. I'm a sorta-baptist. I'm progressive. I recycle. I drive a Prius and ride a bicycle whenever I can. I eat locally. I shop at the Farmers' Market. I show up at meetings, march, go to vigils, I vote, I volunteer, and I work across racial divisions. I'm in an LGBT inclusive church, which I attend most Sundays. I tithe, and show up for workdays. I'm thankful that I'm not like those other Baptists like that Publican standing over there."

Meanwhile, the Publican stands apart, as well, on the margins, "beating his breast." He keeps his head down. His words are simple. He does not embark on an eloquent litany of his sins to match the Pharisee's virtues. He hopes in God alone,

not in an extravagant outpouring of remorse. He is humble. Like other powerless outsiders in Luke and in the Old Testament, the poor, the widow, the stranger, the Publican casts himself on the mercies of God, and God hears and upholds his prayer.

But what if we came back next week and he was there again, back off in the corner saying the same prayer? And the week after that, and the week after that, he was still there and every time he prayed the same prayer?

Nathaniel Hawthorne in his novel *The Marble Faun* has one of his characters complain about a statue that catches the human figure in a transitional posture – in between. The living form, he objects, should never be frozen by the artist in such a halfway position that one viewing it for the second or third time longs to cry out, “Well, get on with it. Throw it or drop it. Stand or fall. Live or die. But don’t just hang there in between!” (William Muehl, “The Cult of the Publican,” *A Chorus of Witnesses*, p. 147-148).

When I was a boy, in my hometown First Baptist Church, we had a man who walked the aisle (came forward during the last hymn) at least once a month, sometimes twice a month. He was known around town as something of a rogue, maybe a little bit of a scoundrel, although I never knew for sure why. All I remember is that he came forward crying every couple of weeks and each and every time the preacher prayed with him. Then he would return to his seat. This went on for years. It was still going on when I went off to college. As a boy, I wondered, “What in the world do you keep crying and praying about every couple of weeks? Why don’t you get on with it? Change. Do something different. Quit being a scoundrel. Get help. Do something.” But he just kept on beating his breast and crying to God – over and over and over.

William Muehl, who taught preaching at Yale for many years, points out that this posture and prayer of the Publican is not held up by Jesus to be our goal and our permanent spiritual posture. Jesus tells this parable to challenge the Pharisees, and anyone else so full of self that there is no room for God.

But Jesus did not mean that our whole view of what it means to be saved, justified, and become a disciple is reflected in this prayer of the Publican. His prayer is a starting point but not the whole point. The entire Christian life is not about living a sin-filled life and then once a week, or once a month, crying with remorse and praying for mercy, and having a moment of conversion, of self-awareness, and having our eyes opened.

In secular culture this same kind of thing shows up as a moment of self-discovery. In the classic 1960 movie, *The Magnificent Seven*, a Mexican village is saved from a vicious band of outlaws by seven killers whose hearts are mysteriously touched by the villager's plight. In the 1957 *Bridge on the River Kwai*, the British colonel, played by Alec Guinness, leads his captive POW British regiment in building a bridge in cooperation with the Japanese. Only at the end, shaken by a nearby explosion, the colonel comes to himself and says in shock, "What have I done?" In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge has a change of heart after being visited during the night by the ghosts of the past, present, and future. Emily has pointed out that this is the basis of almost every Hallmark Channel cheesy Christmas movie: a person lives a despicable life meets someone who by the end of the movie evokes a change of heart. In the 1962 *The Music Man*, the conman is redeemed by falling in love with Marian the librarian and in turn, he redeems the entire town.

All of these movies and stories have the theme of a life of sin redeemed at a moment of self-discovery or self-awareness or having their eyes opened. There is nothing of the day-by-day habits of doing good, being good, having integrity and constancy and truthfulness. Instead, the characters get to live the juicy life of sin and then have one moment of redemption.

This points to how this parable has become misused by the church, especially the American evangelical church. You can be a selfish jerk, a sinner, a philander, a wife-abuser, a greedy narcissistic crook, or whatever – as long as you have said at least one time what’s called the “sinner’s prayer” – “I confess my sin and ask you to be my personal savior. Come into my heart and save me.”

Now hear me clearly: I am all for praying the sinner’s prayer – UNLESS – it is used and misused again and again, with no change, no transformation, no efforts to do something different and grow as a Christian. To use New Testament language, repentance must show forth fruits of repentance.

There comes a time when we need to trust that we are forgiven and accept divine grace to move beyond regret, remorse, and acknowledgment of our sins and start growing as a Christian. God gives us mercy so we can become merciful. We become blessed in order to be a blessing to others. We certainly can’t do that if we are arrogant like the Pharisee. But neither can we do it if we remain habitually mired in chronic conversion from sin but never do anything about the sin other than crying about it to God.

In the Greek language grammar of the New Testament there is a verb tense called the Aorist Tense, which is expressed as “punctiliar action,” which means action that happens in an isolated, specific point in time. It is like a snapshot. There

is also the Present Tense, which is expressed as continuous action. It is like a movie.

This Publican's prayer is misused by many Christians because they see the Christian life as a series of punctiliar actions. One isolated act of humble prayer disconnected from others or any other action. Faith becomes a punctiliar faith. Instead, we are called to have faith that is continuous, like a movie where there is movement, change, growth, and where we are becoming more Christ-like over time.

So how might we be freed from the misuse of faith like the Publican? While at the same time not misusing faith like the self-centered, prideful Pharisee?

One clue is that Jesus says the Pharisee was "standing by himself" and he says the Publican was standing "far off." What if over time, they learned to stand together? What if they stood with others and alongside of each other? What if they came close to one another and had a conversation? Perhaps this arrogant Pharisee might get to know someone for whom the life of faith is difficult and beset with setbacks and relapses, someone for whom failure is a daily occurrence? What if the Pharisee got out of himself and genuinely made room in his heart for God and for the Publican? At the same time, what if the Publican became friends with this Pharisee so he could begin to practice the new habits of daily prayer and Bible study, and serving others? After experiencing baptism as being buried with Christ, perhaps the Publican could come up from baptism "raised to walk in newness of life" alongside the Pharisee?

Jesus told the previous parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge to teach persistence in prayer. Maybe Jesus tells this parable to talk about persistence of faith, a faith persistently trusting in the grace of God that changes

hearts and transforms people. And that kind of persistence takes place when we help and encourage one another, when we pray with each other rather than far off from one another. When we stop standing off by ourselves and then go home and instead, we start standing together in the presence of Christ.

And by the way, if those two start standing together, and learn from each other, they might very well become more interesting and enjoyable people to be with.

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God
Mother of us all. Amen.