

Sermon October 27, 2019

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

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." ~ Luke 18:9-14

Many of us probably see worship on Sunday, and the culminating act of taking communion within the service, as central to our faith. But there is something else equally important that we probably know about, but don't realize is also foundational and fundamental to our lives as people of faith: prayer. Jesus invites us to follow his way, to live fully in the world, to embrace and love the brokenness in the world, even our own brokenness, and to pray directly from our imperfect and wounded selves.

Here we have a second parable about prayer, this one about the attitude we take into prayer. In the parable, we see two contrasting characters—the Pharisee and the tax collector. Let's think about the gospel writer and the context of the parable, and how the Gospel writer related this story Jesus told. Who was Luke's audience? Luke's audience were early Christians who came years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Maybe Antioch. Messianic Jews. Gentiles. Urban and educated Greeks. Early Christians. Meeting in houses, chanting the gospel and sayings of Jesus.

Luke's audience had a family relationship with the Pharisees. Who were Pharisees in Luke's time? There was huge diaspora from Jerusalem after the destruction of the temple by the Romans in the first century. The temple complex was irreversibly torn down and demolished. The very center of the Jewish identity and faith and culture had been annihilated. All of the high priests and their families had been killed. The Pharisees responded to this crisis by working to codify and recreate the sacraments in a way that was no longer dependent on the temple priests, who had all been murdered—Judaism became centered around Shabbat, Rabbis, synagogue, family, smaller more intimate rituals. The Pharisees felt enormous responsibility and though they were keeping the Jewish community alive—not a certain proposition—you might imagine that they were quite militant, and from a gentile point of view, insufferably picky about details, rules and regulations. Worse, in their militancy, they rejected unorthodox views, including the messianic Jewish followers of Jesus the Christ, and made a rule that at the end of a service, at dismissal, everyone had to recite a curse entreating God to bring down his wrath on anyone who believed in the Messiah. Essentially, they kicked any followers of The Way out of the community. This was hurtful.

Who were tax collectors? The system was often abused—a tax collector would contract with the Romans to collect taxes, and would grift in excess of the tax, and keep the difference—tax farmers.

The early Christians who were chanting scripture with Luke probably did not identify with either the Pharisee or the tax collector—each was problematic. Each person elicited feelings of self-righteousness and superiority in his listeners. So both in Jesus' day—in the telling of this parable—and in Luke's day in the retelling of this story, the main characters in this story elicited strong feelings.

This is a parable about attitude in prayer— which we might think of as a conversation with God. Of these two unlikable people, who gets the prize from Jesus?

The one who is in the world, fully embracing life with its brokenness, the tax collector.

Where are we located in this parable? First we are challenged in our self-righteousness. Have I ever considered someone scornfully? Come at them with a secret sense of superiority? A liberal? A conservative? A foreigner? A local? A parent in the checkout-line with a screaming toddler? The person on the flight from Mexico who has a dog with them in carry on who keeps yapping? I think we can all think of examples. Have we ever been a bit smug? Convinced of our rightness and goodness: patting ourselves on the back for things the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have called cheap grace. "I'm good, and right, I go to church on Sundays; I'm nice. I work hard, I play by the rules, I live in a good community," and so on. In God's Kingdom, the parable tells us that all the things that compel us into that distorted exalted view of ourselves will be humbled. Jesus is saying, look, that person whom you dislike is willing to be vulnerable and have a real conversation with God. The tax collector is praying, "O God, you see my brokenness, the ways in which I have missed the mark, hurt others, hurt myself. I need you to help. I need your forgiveness."

To God, these are the starting materials that She can use to transform us into more loving people—so that we can be given to serve. This is the profound this-worldliness of Christianity that Bonhoeffer was writing about: the active participation and gift of our whole selves, including our faults and flaws, in a spirit of humility, to this life. What Bonhoeffer describes as the uncanny this-worldliness of Jesus, and Christianity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who came from a prominent family. Unlike many church leaders in Germany, he spoke out against the Nazis and Hitler, and in 1943 was imprisoned by the Gestapo. He was hanged by the Nazis just at the end of the war in 1945. He wrote many letters to family, friends and colleagues from prison. In one of his letters he tells a story of when he was a very young man in the United States studying theology at the Union Theological Seminary.

Bonhoeffer from letters in prison:

During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is... simply a [person], as Jesus was a [person]. I don't mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection.

*I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it's quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn't realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I suppose I wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote.*

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that is it only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-world-liness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world-watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf. Jer. 45!). How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind?

Does it matter how we pray? I would argue that it doesn't. It's the attitude that we take into our prayers that matters. God wants our brokenness. Our humility. He doesn't want us for a sunbeam, squeaky clean, and self-righteous. In order to prepare us for the work of loving ourselves and our neighbors, God needs our willingness to be changed.

The forms prayer take are varied. This is a wonderful gift, and I commend these beautiful prayer traditions to you. You should try them and find what works for you. I have experienced amazing advice in exploring these patterns of prayer:

- Monastic- the hours - Benedict nothing harsh or burdensome
- Pray without ceasing – the way of the pilgrim - Lord Jesus Christ, Have mercy on Me.
- Go into your room and close the door - privately
- Walk a labyrinth
- Find a quiet and peaceful place in nature
- And many others

What will your pattern be? I'm going to end with this poem by the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado. I often think of poems as a certain kind of prayer, and this poem captures the beauty of God working in our hearts to make honey from our faults and failures.

“Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvellous error!—
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.
I said: Along which secret aqueduct,
Oh water, are you coming to me,
water of a new life
that I have never drunk?

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvellous error!—
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures.

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvellous error!—
that a fiery sun was giving
light inside my heart.
It was fiery because I felt
warmth as from a hearth,
and sun because it gave light
and brought tears to my eyes.

Last night, as I slept,
I dreamt—marvellous error!—
that it was God I had
here inside my heart.”
~Antonio Machado