

Oct. 28, 2007
Luke 18:9-14
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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On Our Knees

A couple of weeks ago, some of our teenagers helped us imagine what it would be like if God answered when we were saying the Lord's Prayer. They struggled with the tendency to approach prayer as simply a "routine" that we have to do. At the same time, they recognized how communicating with the Holy might be a profound experience.

People are often coming up with imaginative reflections on the human perplexities about talking with God. Sometimes people imagine it is like making a phone call. Here is one such scenario with a very modern and ironic twist.

Thank you for calling Heaven. Please select one of the following options:

Press 1 for Requests

Press 2 for Thanksgiving

Press 3 for Complaints

Press 4 for all other inquiries.

Then after making your selection you hear: *I am sorry, all of our angels and saints are busy helping other sinners right now.*

However, your prayer is important to us and we will answer it in the order in which it was received. Please stay on the line.

It makes us laugh and it makes us cringe. It clearly reflects our frustration with voice messaging systems. It also points to our spiritual puzzlements about how to have connection with the Holy. But one of the other interesting things about this scenario is that, while it refers to the people who are praying as sinners, none of the initial options is "Confession."

Now some people are too quick to confess, assuming in any painful situation that somehow it's their fault. But for many of us it's difficult to select confession right up front. Maybe we have to be led to it. Which is exactly what Jesus does in today's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican or, as we would more likely call him, the tax collector.

The Pharisee and the tax collector. When we hear the title of the parable, some of our prejudices, our pre-judging, are different from the disciples who first heard the story. If we've been around church for a while, as soon as we hear the title, we already think of both the Pharisee **and** the tax collector as bad guys. However, to the disciples, to whom Jesus was telling this parable, the Pharisee would have been seen as a classic 'good guy,' a 'pillar of the temple.' Pharisees were highly esteemed in the community as people whose lives were devoted to God through study and observance of the Torah and through maintaining ritual purity in all matters.

Our prejudice regarding the tax collector is in the same direction as the people of Jesus' day. Although they would have perceived him even more as a classic 'bad guy.' In those times, a tax collector was one of a group of people who paid in advance for the right to collect tolls and fees. Effectively, he was told, "Get what you can." It was a system that was corrupt and abusive.

To the disciples the introduction to the story sets it up to be a classic good guy – bad guy scenario.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee (thumbs up) and the other a tax collector. (thumbs down)

But then Jesus, in the classic way of his parables, turns things upside down. As we listen in on the prayers of the two men, things quickly become more complex.

In last week's parable of the widow and the judge we saw, as one theologian (Peter Rhea Jones, NIB, V. IX, 340) put it, the *promise of persistent prayer* in the widow's persistence; whereas in this week's parable we encounter the *peril of presumptuous prayer*.

We're quickly given a clue about the disruption of our expectations when the first thing we are told about the Pharisee is that he was "standing by himself." He's a man unto himself. And he prays:

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.

The Pharisee's thankfulness is perversely rooted in his separateness and what he presumptuously perceives as the moral uprightness of his religious practices. He seems to be pretty sure that he and God are 'best buds' having a little chat, which includes comments about that no-good fellow over in the corner.

That no-good fellow in the corner, however, takes a very different approach to prayer. The tax collector, not making any presumptions about his relationship with God, stands far off, doesn't look up to heaven, and beats his breast, saying,

God, be merciful to me a sinner!

This tax collector, apparently, has become painfully aware of the reality that his life has become a destructively entangled web. We aren't told what has finally broken through his defenses and denial and brought him to the Temple to pray for forgiveness. But here he is. We might say that he is 'on his knees,' at least figuratively, if not literally.

Now, obviously if we scratched the surface of these two characters, things would be become even more complex, with extenuating circumstances and more nuances to their characters. You could write a whole novel. But, this very succinct parable is an oversimplified stark comparison, which challenges the typical preconceptions of the disciples.

As with the parable of the Good Samaritan, there is a dramatic reversal of expectation in this story. If the disciples had started to snooze, this would have snapped their heads back. Surely, the Pharisee will give the religiously profound prayer, but that is exactly what doesn't happen. The appropriate response comes from the improbable person – the tax collector.

Now who is the bad guy? It's easy to become indignant about this Pharisee. What a jerk he is! Thank God, we're not like him. **AAAhh, there it is.** That's exactly what catches the Pharisee. How easy it is to get tangled in our own webs of separation and alienation from others!

The disciples probably assumed that as they grew spiritually it would get easier to be faithful. This parable also challenges that preconception. As we deepen our spiritual journeys, struggles with brokenness do not disappear. In fact, sometimes they become more elusive, just as we can see with the Pharisee, who is deeply invested in his own spiritual practices.

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Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, tells of her own struggles to grow in discipleship. She recognizes her own separation and alienation from others in her usual irreverent and, at times, painfully honest ways. As she is growing in faith, Anne decides she needs to work on practicing forgiveness more than she has. Since she figures it is best to start small

if there is to be any hope, she starts with someone she considers an *Enemy Lite* – one of the other mothers from her son’s first grade class. Anne confesses that she doesn’t like this other mother because from Anne’s perspective this mother is too perfect – she has everything figured out, bakes fabulous snacks, looks great in latex bicycle shorts, and her son is doing great in school. Anne finds forgiveness isn’t easy. She finds herself **standing off by herself**, trying to keep away from this woman. Yet, she still tries to do the right religious practice. She prays.

Anne writes in her book,
I prayed for a miracle; I wrote her name down on a slip of paper, folded it up, and put it in the box that I use as God’s In box. “Help,” I said to God.

Then on the day that this woman gives Anne some books, suggesting that they might Anne’s son with his reading, Anne goes to the God box, gets out the piece of paper and adds an exclamation mark. She puts the paper back in the box. Things are basically so – so for the rest of the year.

Then, near the end of the school year, one day Anne goes to pick up her son, Sam, from this woman’s house, where he has been playing after school. Reluctantly, Anne sits for a moment exchanging small talk and then getting ready to go, she finds herself on her knees, literally and then figuratively.

Sam’s shoes were on the mat by the front door, next to his friend’s, and I went over to help him put them on. And as I loosened the laces on one shoe, without realizing what I was doing, I sneaked a look into the other boy’s sneaker – to see what size shoe he wore. To see how my kid lined up in shoe size.

And I finally got it.

The veil dropped. I got that I am as mad as a hatter. I saw that I was the one worried

that my child wasn’t doing well enough in school. That I was the one who thought I was out of shape. And that I was trying to get her to carry all this for me because it hurt too much to carry it myself...

...so I started speaking sweetly to everyone – to the mother, to the boys. And my sweet voice started getting all over me, like sunlight, like the smell of the Danish baking in the oven, two of which she put on a paper plate and covered with tin foil for me and Sam to take home. Now obviously, the woman has a little baking disorder. And I am glad.

In her humble and humorous honesty Anne Lamott is able to confess the barriers of alienation and separation she had set up between herself and the other mother. Anne realizes that effectively she has been praying, “Thank God that I am not like that other mother,” as a way to protect herself from her own frailties and fears. In an act of confession, Anne is freed to a new way of being with the other mother and with herself.

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Today’s reading ends with words about humility. One of the things we learn about humility from this parable is that being humble calls us to recognize our common humanity with those we would rather not be like, with those we catch ourselves, “I’m glad I’m not like them,” - be they near or far.

Jesus told this story to the disciples, not to the crowds. It is not a story for those new to the faith. It is for those who are growing spiritually. It is a story challenging Jesus’ followers to a deeper Way of discipleship and points out some of the pitfalls along the way.

Instead of standing by ourselves, being grateful that “those people” are standing far off, the parable calls all of us – those standing by themselves and those standing far off – to be together - on our knees - trusting in God’s grace.