

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 10.23.22

**Luke 18:9-14**

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.” (145)

This parable is tricky. It invites us to hold the pharisee in some contempt, but as soon as we do, we’re people who hold some certain other in contempt—which is the very thing the parable suggests we’re not to do.

This is one of two back-to-back parables on prayer, and it’s one bit of a lot of talk in this gospel on prayer. The Gospel of Luke, and its companion book, the Acts of the Apostles, both feature a lot of prayer. Jesus prays a lot in these books, and the apostles that make up the early church do, too. The Holy Spirit, whose presence is the fruit of prayer, plays an active role in both Luke and Acts. In fact, every significant thing that happens in these books is at the spur of the Holy Spirit. Every event witnessed to in these books is because the Holy Spirit has inspired it, enabled it.

The question comes up a lot, apparently, why did Jesus have to pray? If he was the very presence of God in the world, and if prayer is a matter of communing with God and discerning the will of God and petitioning God for what a body needs, then why would Jesus have to do this?

The question came up in the most recent book we finished at Book Club. It wasn’t a great book. It wasn’t really all that *good* a book. *Spiritual Practices of Jesus: Learning Simplicity, Humility, and Prayer with Luke’s Earliest Readers* had some good information, but it repeated much of it. It could have used a good editor.

Worse, the several examples of how *not* to be what the author thought a Christian ought to be were all Black men. Our author, a White woman, and an evangelical Christian teaching at an evangelical college, never chose negative examples from within her own demographic group. She always went outside her group to find examples of how not to be—which isn’t to say demographic groups should be so determinative, and isn’t to say you should never criticize people who aren’t like you. It *is* to say you shouldn’t only criticize people who aren’t like you, especially not when so many people within your group are just as worthy of critique.

This is a subtle move, for those who don't have eyes to see it; and we, as a book group, almost didn't. We were mostly White, and therefore not operating in a racialized way.

This is the relief in being among your racial kind: you're for the moment relieved of being racialized. This is why, as an answer to the eternal question, why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? It's because, I imagine, Black people, as a small minority in our society, just under 13%, look for opportunities not to be racialized, opportunities just to be taken as people.

White people, of course, making up the majority of the population at 61%, spend much of our time among just our kind, so we can go about our lives largely relieved of being racialized. "We're just folks," we might suppose. "We don't have a race," we might believe. And this is why, when we are racialized, when our race is pointed out and we're spoken of as types from a group, some of us get so outraged.

For all this, it's wise to stay woke to when racism creeps in, for it's always looking for a way in. Catherine Wright, the author of the book on spiritual practices, was asleep to it, and counted on her readers being asleep to it.

But our book group was outside her group just enough to notice the examples she picked on to demonstrate greed, selfishness, aggrandizing pride, and the like. Us New England mainliners would have thought of others to stand for those things—and one person in particular, who happened to be in the White House at the time of her writing her book.

It was actually striking how absent from her book Donald Trump was, given that humility was one spiritual gift she was exalting. It was interesting to watch her work so hard not to mention him.

And I get that Trump can't be our go-to guy for that all the time, if nothing else because it's boring. But we did notice our writer's working so hard to keep the bad ones far outside her world, and it was striking, was problematic.

All this said, it was a book I'm glad to have read. She brought back to my awareness a lot of ancient Christian thinking I'd forgotten about in my time since divinity school when it was put upon me to read such things.

It seems a question long standing is why Jesus needed to pray. The patristics wondered it. Preachers of the medieval church did too. Moderns pondered it. Why?

And maybe I'm missing something, but I think it's not that hard a question. I think they're just framing it wrong.

When the kids were younger, every once in a while they'd ask, "Why do we have to go to church?" And I'd answer, half-seriously, "It's not that you *have* to go to church. It's that you *get* to go to church."

Same with Jesus and prayer. It's not that he *had* to. It's that he *got* to, or more precisely he allowed himself to. He allowed himself quiet. He allowed himself solitude. He allowed himself an opening to the Holy Spirit, this thing so easy to deny yourself or fail to notice your want of, or to ignore or to close out; but this thing that is always the fruit of prayer.

The Holy Spirit: that this manifest though ephemeral presence of God shows up, that the Holy Spirit of truth and being persists and pervades and is ever-present for our receiving of it: it's not that we *have* to turn to this, it's that we *get* to.

Have you ever been so busy that you can't do something as basic as get a drink of water?

This happens to me. A lot. I'll be going here and there, and I'll grab a coffee because I'm sort of dragging. Or I'll grab some crackers because I've got a hankering for something. Finally, after sometimes a full day of depriving myself, I'll give it a moment's thought and realize, I think I'm thirsty for water.

And I reflect on the day to realize there was water literally everywhere I went. At my office, down the hall. In my home, in the next room. At the gym where I'm waiting for Jack, in the bubbler in the lobby. In the hull of my boat as I row, in the water bottle I always keep tucked there. In any of the places as I drive down the street. I could stop there and get some water. Or there and get some water. We live in a quite amazing country where every faucet has potable water ready to flow out of it, except the ones marked otherwise, which are few. Why didn't I just stop for a moment and drink some water—for when at last I do it tastes *so good*, or rather it feels so good, for water isn't about what it tastes like on your tongue but about how it feels in your whole body.

Prayer. It can feel very good.

It can also be intimidating, for in prayer it's just you and God, you and the silence, you and the presence of that which is not you and which might also feel like absence. You're alone. You're alone with God. You're alone.

There's also the matter that you might be doing it wrong. Or at least not quite right. Or not frequently enough. Whatever guilt you have simmering in your spirit as you go about your life is likely to find you when you take a moment of quiet. Whatever anxiety you have buzzing like bees in your chest cavity will rise to menace if you let your body stop its buzzing even more. Whatever of grief or disappointment or regret or shame or humiliation you've got tucked away beneath your

gorgeous functioning will likely find its way to your consciousness if you take a minute to rest from your gorgeous functioning. If your life is one grand performance, then prepare for prayer to be a falling away of the performance, a slipping off of any pretense.

It's just you alone with God, a most gracious audience, a most *seeing* audience.

The pharisee's prayer is problematic not only because he's self-righteous and contemptuous of others. It's problematic for reasons more fundamental than that. He hooks someone else into his prayer. He drags someone else into what more truly should be a moment alone with his Lord.

We do this. Last week's sermon, which was really just a retelling of the story of Jacob, was a reigning example of this. It's so often how we know ourselves at all, in defining who we're not, in comparing or competing or envying in regard to another.

And it's fine for us to do, at least early on. After all, we physically develop our being by slowly separating from one with whom we were actually one—our mothers were once ourselves, and then slowly they separate from ourselves. From there, the process of maturation and individuation progresses until we're grown, until we're largely supposed to be able to do it on our own.

Which is never fully the case, of course.

We're always in some need of our wider community.

The challenge, as this Pharisee makes clear to us, is for what do we depend upon others? In what way and to what purpose do we *use* others? And can we tolerate a moment just reflecting on ourselves? Can we even enjoy it? Find relief in it? Be filled with such graces as mercy, forgiveness, understanding, wisdom, love for others, love for ourselves? And beyond that, an understanding of ourselves in the world, our place in our generation and the place of our generation in the whole of time itself, and then that which lies beyond time, which is the eternal realm of God's glory and love?

There's a lot to think about. There's a lot to wonder about, and to be in wonder about, awe about. And maybe Jesus didn't *have* to do this thing that enables greater mastery in the art of living. But it seems the less you have to pray for such mastery, the more you feel it as *getting* to pray, having the opportunity to do this thing that feels as good as anything does.

The tax collector was far from such mastery, we might fairly conclude. Tax collectors were as much mobster as civil servant. They exploited those from whom they collected taxes. It was extortion as much as anything, and any who did it had to be pretty ruthless and any who did it well were likely feared, and then resented.

And it's important to notice that this moment of prayer doesn't seem to have changed much about him. He didn't swear off tax collecting in prayer; he didn't promise never to do it again. He also doesn't seem to have been much changed by the encounter, at least as far as we know.

The story's scope is narrow.

And it's possible this moment of being justified made him double-down on his terrible way of life. It happens like that sometimes. Some people, feeling themselves as "saved," make the mistake of thinking there's little more for them to do about it all than that.

For others, though, that moment of prayer and justification is the beginning of the end of terrible living.

We don't know which it will be when it comes to this storied tax collector. I, for one, don't know how possible it was to change a life in ancient Rome, to move from tax collector to man of mercy and grace. It's hard now. It was probably hard then, even perhaps harder then.

The trick of this parable is not to fail to see that in regard to either man. Contempt of others is a weak response to a world filled with things seemingly worthy of our contempt. Hope and grace are more magnanimous, which takes real strength. For me, it's about a 50/50 chance I'll go with contempt, I'll go with grace.

But if there's hope for me, then there's hope for you. Try a moment alone, being with being, as perhaps you already have, as perhaps you long have. Then try a few, to be slaked by stillness in this desert of the busy, this desert of the doing—like maybe even now.

Thanks be to God.