

Luke 18:9-14
Creekside COB
October 24, 2004

“Two Kinds of Prayer”

Sometimes while writing sermons I think, "Maybe I should have gone into a more practical line of work." As an architecture student I drew lines on paper that looked like a building when I finished.

I don't work with lines any more. I work with words. Words are fragile and fickle. I know what I intend the words to mean, but once spoken, I never know what will become of them. They are received or rejected. They are understood or misunderstood. They will be forgotten. I learned early not to think I had written a great sermon. Soaring eagle sermons turn into dead ducks. Sermons that aren't worthy of a wastebasket, touch people's heart. Like Jesus said to Nicodemus, "The Spirit blows when and where it wills."

Today I have strung some words together, and have decided to spare some of you from them. If your marriage couldn't be better; if your children are obedient, on the school honor role, and never have given you a moment's grief; if your faith is solid and your doubts insignificant; if you understand the Bible and have no questions or struggles with it; if your life is a bowl of cherries and you can't think of a thing you would change, YOU CAN LEAVE NOW. Go to the Matterhorn and enjoy a leisurely brunch before the church crowd arrives. I have nothing to say to you. However, if you have issues, you may want to stick around. The sermon might have something for you.

Jesus told a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. We were taught to be like one and not the other. We were taught to behave, be good, and do good. We were taught to avoid unsavory people. It is unbecoming of people, like us. But the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector blows what we

were taught to smithereens. If it doesn't rub you the wrong way, you have not heard it.

The text begins, "Jesus told his next story to some who were pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people." (18:9) Two men went to the temple to pray, and after their "Amen's," it was the tax collector, the bad guy who went home justified-- made right with God, not the Pharisee, the good guy with the polished prayer and perfect Sunday school attendance. Those who heard the parable for the first time knew who would walk away blessed. The righteous are always rewarded. Follow the rules and you're good with God. What a shock when Jesus said the tax collector, who ripped off his own people, was the one who was justified.

Why? Was it because the tax collector's prayer was more sincere? No. Both men were sincere. Was it because the tax collector was more humble? This is the way many have interpreted the parable, the point being that we should work on our humility. But have you ever tried to be humble? If you try, you are being conscious of yourself, and humble people don't think of themselves. As far as humility is concerned, you either are or aren't.

Humility is a slick and slippery virtue for religious people. Speaking about her struggle with humility, a woman at church was eager to tell others what she has learned. "I will teach a Sunday school class on how you can achieve humility just as I have." Humility IS a slick, slippery virtue for religious people. I heard a pastor share an anecdote about his old Sunday school teacher. After she had told the children this parable she said, "And thank God we're not like that Pharisee!" Humility is slick and slippery. Have you ever thought to yourself, "If the rest of the world could just be more like me, it would be a much better place?"

Who do you identify with in the parable? Most would say, "The tax collector." We stand on his side of the fence and criticize the puffed-up, self-righteous windbag Pharisee.

We think of Pharisees as hypocritical villains who didn't love God and cared nothing for people unlike themselves. They clung to superficial, pointless rituals and were out to kill Jesus.

But the Pharisees were devout, righteous, godly people. Jesus respected their devotion to the law. They weren't fundamentalists, but understood that the Law of Moses had to be interpreted for the times in which they lived. They had a passion for justice and longed for God's will to be done on earth. Like Christians, the Pharisees didn't always live what they professed. The Pharisee knew he was called to be different. He avoided sin. He prayed. He fasted. He tithed.

Imagine arriving early to church. You look in the sanctuary and see a man up front praying. He's a respected leader in the church. He is well known in the community. He is chair of the United Way Campaign. He is a Bethel Bible instructor, a popular Sunday school teacher, and Bible study leader.

You overhear his eloquent prayer: "God, I thank you that I was raised in a Christian home by loving God-fearing parents who brought me to church every Sunday. I am thankful they read me Bible stories, taught me right from wrong, and instilled within me a love for the church and living a Christ-like life. I thank you that I did not walk in the ways of people who cared neither for you nor others. I never say "No" to serving the church. I tithe. In fact, I give above the tithe to special appeals. I give a week of vacation every year to help with disaster clean-up projects. I volunteer at Church Community Services. I cook meals and lead chapel at the Faith Mission. I personally deliver holiday baskets to needy people in the community. I don't use tobacco products and only have a small glass of wine on special occasions." He is a good man.

Then you notice a man in the back pew, hunched over with his face in his hands. He is also praying, but his prayer is different. He has done nothing commendable in his life. He made his living taking-cheating and defrauding. He cannot look up to pray. He is

too ashamed to show his face. "God, I'm a miserable, pathetic man-- a snake in the grass-- a total loser. Have mercy on me."

The Pharisee asked God for nothing. He was grateful for what he had received, and confident that he could stand tall and be a good on his own. The tax collector asked for everything. He had nothing to show for his life. He didn't know how to pray. He was as low as he could go. All he could pray was, "Lord, have mercy."

Who did God favor? "That's a no brainer," the people said to themselves. What a shock to the system when Jesus said, "The tax man went home with a blessing. HE was justified, forgiven, made right with God by God, not the Pharisee."

During my sabbatical I worshipped at the Liberty Presbyterian Church in Powell, Ohio. The senior pastor of many years, David Redding, is a prolific writer. In one of his books, *The Golden String*, he talks about the pride problem. He says: "One of the hazards of religious people is that they have a tendency to put on weight around the temples... Pride is the dragon mother that feeds predominately on the religious. A profession of faith is a dangerous thing. In some ways it is safer to be a sinning nobody. God himself prefers the curses of the profane to the prayers of the pious braggart. Even thanks can be seduced by pride as when the Pharisee prayed, 'I thank thee that I am not like other men...'

That prayer was no thanks really, for that Pharisee was taking credit instead of giving thanks. This is the trouble that dogs the people mothers are so proud of. They think they're it. And that's what most of hell is made of--not just bad people but people who think they're it."

A few years ago I was asked by an acquaintance to conduct his father's funeral. He said there were some uncertainties about what could happen when the family came together. To put it mildly, the family was a mess. There had been sexual abuse. Several members were struggling with addictions. Some had done time behind bars. Siblings were estranged from their father

and each other, and all of them were coming to the funeral. One of the daughters of the deceased was living with the most powerful drug dealer in Elkhart and St. Joe County, and he would be in attendance. Other so-called "business people" were coming from Chicago to pay their respects.

I called the funeral director and asked if he knew about the "issues." He had just been called by the police and told they were "monitoring" the situation. Usually I'm not concerned about bullets flying at funerals. To my knowledge I've never ministered to members of organized crime. I spend all my time with Pharisees! "Treat it like any funeral," I was told, "But keep your eyes open... just in case." I could see the headlines: "FUNERAL TURNS DEADLY-BELOVED BRETHREN PASTOR AMONG THE VICTIMS."

"God I am so grateful for my life. How fortunate that I was to grow up in an average family; to be surrounded and supported by quality people, and grafted into the church. Thank you that I steered clear of the wrong crowd, and didn't stray too far from what I was taught. The sins of my youth are behind me and I escaped spending the night in jail. I've given my life to telling others about your love and leading the church. Thank you, God, that I didn't end up like these people gathered for a funeral."

After the service at the cemetery, estranged brothers and sisters were crying and hugging each other. Several came up to me and thanked me for doing the service even though I didn't know any of them and they didn't go to church. Then the sharp-dressed, drug dealer approached me. He shook my hand, and in a soft, sincere, humble voice he said, "You spoke to my heart. Thank you."

Two men went to a funeral. One was a Church of the Brethren pastor, the other a drug dealer. They went their different ways after the service One to his church office, the other to the streets of South Bend. The dealer went back justified, blessed, not the pastor.

A Lutheran Bishop, Gerald Kennedy, told a story about a medieval monk who said that everyone who gets to heaven will be shocked by three things: "One, he'll be surprised to see many he did not think would be there; two, he will be surprised that some are not there whom he had expected to see; and three, he will be surprised that he himself is there."

The gift of God's grace isn't given because of anything WE have done. This parable of Jesus is not about our trying to be humble, good, sincere, or acceptable because of something we did or didn't do. This parable isn't even about the Pharisee and the tax collector. It is about God and the gift of his grace-unmerited and undeserved grace that we receive when we admit how needy we are, how far we stray from God we are by the choices we make, and how incapable we are of fixing ourselves by ourselves. It's a gift. It's grace. We come before God empty-handed. We pray, "Lord, have mercy." And God does.

If you'll stay with me just a little more, I want to leave you with these words by Howard Thurman that describe the life that God's grace makes possible:

Whether your childhood was sad or happy as you look back upon it, there is one thing about it that is true. There were moments of intense and complete joy, which for the instant left nothing to be desired. It may have been your first new dress, or new suit; the thing about which you had dreamed for, oh, so many days was actually yours!

Perhaps it was the first time you received a letter through the mail; yes, the postman actually brought it. I may have been your first time to visit a circus to see live tigers, lions, elephants, and big, big snakes; and there was the merry-go-round and the fluffy candy and the pink lemonade.

Perhaps it was the time when your mother let you mix the dough for the bread or sent you on your first errand in the next block alone. You may have been eavesdropping when the teacher came to call and you heard her say how smart you were and what a joy you were to teach. (And you

wondered whether our mother would remember to tell your daddy what the teacher had said. At supper you managed to bring it up, so that your mother would be reminded.)

Your greatest moment of fullness may have come when, for the first time, you were conscious that your mother loved you-that swirling sense of sheer ecstasy when you were completely aware of another's love. Do you remember? It was a foretaste of something for which you would be in quest all the rest of your days; the matured relationships of friends and loved ones, of husband and wife; and that gradual or climactic moment of religious fulfillment when the heart and mind echo the words of St. Augustine: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our souls are restless till they find their rest in Thee!"