

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Joel 2:23-29

Luke 18:9-14

TO WHOM DO WE PRAY?

It may already be too late, but I'd like to warn you about a trap. It's sort of like one of those television police shows, where an undercover officer sets up a secret opportunity for someone who has carried out wrongdoing in the past to have another opportunity to mess up again. But this time, everything is surreptitiously arranged so that the person can be caught red-handed. The police make sure they have a witness who would then be able to testify against the perpetrator and put them where they belong. Have you seen one or more of those episodes?

I'd like to propose that the parable we just heard from Luke is the undercover officer here. But we have to get into the story to understand what that means. Jesus spins a tale about two people who went to the temple to pray. One is identified as a respected religious leader, a Pharisee who frequently fasts and gives generously of the resources placed in his care. The other person was a tax collector, who would have been among the least respected of people. The Pharisee looks over at the other person with disdain, reminding him of a whole 'basket of deplorables,' or as someone he would call a 'pig,' before he haughtily prays, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

And at that point of the story, we might notice he was trying to lift himself up by putting others down and we would begin to shake our heads at the clear condescension that showed such a blatant failure to love one's neighbors. And then before we think about it, we say to ourselves, "I am thankful that I'm not like that Pharisee." And just as we express it, we realize we have been caught in the act. If we were a part of a police television show, someone would say to us, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you." That would be a reason for us to stop talking to God, if we thought we were going to get ourselves in trouble by doing so. In our very saying that we were thankful that we were not like the Pharisee, we would be demonstrating that in his least attractive quality, we are in fact like him.

Now, if we follow the regular television script, we would hire a defense attorney who would cry out that it was entrapment on Jesus' part – the story ruse lulled us into it. All charges should be dismissed. But when Jesus sets it up to catch us in the wrong, his goal is not to imprison us. In fact, instead of being in the entrapment business, Jesus is the one who liberates. The point of this story is to show us how much we need to be freed and to show us how it can happen.

The Pharisee in the story, even before he goes to pray, is locked in irons, and he doesn't even realize it. He thinks he lives in perfect autonomy, free even of the need of God's grace. He knows what faithfulness calls for and he does just the right things. He is not bound by his bodily appetites as demonstrated by his practice of fasting even more often than was required. He tithes not just from certain portions of his income; he gives ten percent of it all. Now that we have entered the season for stewardship emphasis, I'm a little hesitant to be critical of the ways this person lives out his faith. He demonstrates great self-discipline and generosity. Would that more of us followed his example in these areas!

However, this is someone who when he sees the tax collector, does not say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Neither does he give thanks that God has spared him from the temptation of stealing or cheating on his spouse or being roguish in some way. Rather, he gives thanks that he is not like them. That word, 'like' crosses the line from the grammar of gratitude into the language of elitism. All that is good about his life is understood as his own accomplishment. There is no real gratitude here. To borrow Mark Twain's phrase, he is a "good man in the

worst sense of the word.”¹ In this holy place, he has a good eye on himself, a bad eye on his neighbor, and no eye on God. Clearly, this parable indicates that religious practice can be one of the chief ways that we can be absorbed in self-reliance, instead of living by faith and trust in the mercy of God. Attitudes as well as actions count. This is someone who needs to be freed.

The other one who is praying also needs to be freed, but he knows it quite well. As I've said in the past about biblical stories that refer to people who were tax collectors, this man in the story is not a civil servant who simply works for the Internal Revenue Service. Tax collectors at that time were Hebrew people who tended to take whatever they could extort from people and turn over to Rome only that which they could not conceal. They were understood to be traitors, having sold out to the oppressive, occupying Roman force, willing to increase the misery of their fellow citizens in order to pad their own pockets. They helped block the way to freedom for their own people. They were understandably held in utter contempt. But even this tax collector's sin was not greater than God's grace. He had locked himself into a selfish line of work that actively hurt others. He had what he needed financially, but lacked so much else. He doesn't try to explain away his sin psychologically or sociologically or situationally. His actions have been all wrong, but his attitude is finally on the right track. He turns in prayer to the One who could liberate him.

If anyone was ever justified to regard others with contempt, it would have been Jesus. His attitudes and actions were on course because they reflected God's good intent for all people. He loved those who held him in contempt even as they were crucifying him. Instead of judging them harshly, he knew that they were bound by certain fears and even by certain beliefs. He wanted to free them. Some might say that we shouldn't have a prayer of confession of sin in worship, thinking such a characterization of ourselves can be so depressing. We might even get more people to come to worship if we just left out such negative talk. Why call ourselves 'sinners,' when we are all pretty good people – I mean we are in church, aren't we?

And yet, the goal of having a time for all of us to enter into confessing our sins together is to open ourselves to the full redemption and reconciliation that are offered by God's grace. Who is this God to whom we pray? We have a God who reaches out to us in spite of, not because of what we have done. Some of our attitudes and actions just don't measure up to God's good intent for us. It's not the stories of Jesus that entrap us – it is our resistance to repenting of our shortcomings that keeps us from experiencing the full freedom God wants for us. Almost all of us can readily find people who have made decisions worse than some of our own in order to feel better about ourselves. We can look down on them in order to feel as if we are on a higher rung of the ladder. But that does not move us closer to God's good intent for our lives – it actually moves us away from it. God is merciful, and if we are to be more godly, that means being generous in heart as well as in other ways.

Just because I talked earlier about Jesus enticing us to see how our attitudes can so quickly reflect those of the Pharisee's in the story does not mean we have a 'Gotcha' God. God doesn't come at us with blue lights flashing and sirens going off. Rather God comes to us, with a love that seeks to raise us to new heights, not in order that we might look down on others, but to move us toward reaching the full potential God has given us. The best prayers and the best lives are shaped through realizing the nature of the One to whom we are praying.

Gracious and loving God, help us to see ourselves as you see us. Fill us with a grateful awareness that you created us, that we're all your beloved children who need you at work in our lives. Grant us to have a generous and kind spirit toward others. Enable us to live as those who are forgiven and freed that we may grow into the persons you created us to be. In the name and in the power of Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ I got this quote from a secondary source that did not identify its location within Mark Twain's body of work.