

19.10.27 “Other People’s Prayers”

Luke 18:9-14 - Rev. Adam Hange

I saw a meme - a viral internet photo - on social media the other day, that had a child, with eyes closed, hands folded in prayer, making a face like this (consternation/disgust), entitled: “That face you make when someone prays, and you disagree with their theology.” Show of hands if that finds some resonance with you... Someone leads a prayer, you find yourself disagreeing with the tone, wording, theology... Yes? Maybe you’ve even cracked an eye, to the looks on other people’s faces... Maybe you even pray a little “counter prayer” - “God, you know that prayer does not speak for me, OK?” It’s OK, we’ve all been there! This is church, and we’re all family, and as they say, confession is good for the soul!

I’ve sometimes thought, as hard as it is to listen to some spoken prayers, think of all the prayers that remain unspoken... and if I find myself disagreeing with so many prayers that are actually said out loud, *just imagine* if we could somehow “listen in” on people’s most inner thoughts and prayers any time we wanted to... a little creepy, right? It’s a premise fit for either a horror movie or fairly entertaining comedy! But that’s sort of the situation in today’s reading - where Jesus tells the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector.

It’s a somewhat familiar story to many of us, but what might not be familiar is the context where we find it. This follows immediately after Jesus’ parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge - the parable I preached last week. If we were to read on in subsequent verses, we’d read about Jesus welcoming the little children, and then his encounter with a Rich Young Ruler, and Zaccheus the tax-collector. These stories are part of a series of reversal stories - stories where we find Jesus elevating one with little social status above those with greater status in society. In our text for today, the topic is still prayer, and the one elevated is a tax-collector.

Unfortunately, our familiarity with scripture can tend to make these appear two-dimensional “stock” characters. Our conventional idea of a pharisee was a

“self-righteous, rule-bound, religious leader, lacking in comp[assion and insight, contrasted with the repentant, meek, simple, and humble tax-collector. Indeed the word “Pharisee” has entered commoned English language in the adjectival form of that means acting with hypocrisy and self-righteousness.”¹ However, we should note, that the Pharisees held to a liberal interpretation of scripture, and the aim of Pharisaic law was to make observance to Torah available to all.” That means, that in that historical religious context the Pharisees were actually the progressives of their community. They were the ones practicing what most people assumed was the religiously and politically-correct way of keeping their faith. They were the ones who had checked all the right boxes!

In contrast, at that time, tax collectors, far from being seen as humble or simple, were seen to be (and quite often were) dishonest, skimming, cheats - collaborators with the Roman Empire, and well known to enrich themselves by overcharging their own people - and most frequently the poor and vulnerable. They were seen as traitors and thieves. The best I can think of today, is a certain kind of investor who makes millions by buying the rights to life-saving drugs, then raising the costs for the greatest profit - without regard to who might suffer. These were not “good guys.”

So, when Jesus suggests that it was the lying, cheating, thieving, tax-collector who went away justified, and the prayers of the liberal-progressive Pharisee went unheard, you can imagine, ***this was something that caught people’s attention!*** Jesus is using a kind of hyperbole - using the parable, and the classical “reversal” story as a rhetorical device - to challenge his listeners’ preconceptions about who is deserving of God’s grace - who is worthy to come close to enter the circle of the community of faith. It’s worth noting, too, that this was not rhetoric alone. Jesus didn’t just say, we need to welcome all, Jesus did! Indeed, Jesus went on to befriend and even stay in the home of the tax-collector Zaccheus.

AND, we should note, Jesus also befriended Pharisees. In the Gospel of John, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, comes to visit Jesus by night, and they sit up

¹ Feasting on the Word Commentary, p. 213.

late and talk theology. It's then Nicodemus, who, in John 7, reminds his colleagues in the Sanhedrin, that according to the law, a person has a right to be heard before being judged. Then, after the Crucifixion, in John 19:39, it's this same Pharisee, Nicodemus, who comes to bring myrrh and aloes and spices, weight about a hundred pounds - to embalm Jesus' body before burial.

I share this to highlight that fact that Jesus' relationship with the group of religious leaders called the Pharisees was more complex than you might understand from whatever bits of Sunday School you can remember. Many of Jesus' early followers were, in fact, Pharisees. Paul - the great apostle, pastor, and missionary of the early church- was himself a Pharisee. Indeed, this group is the root of what is today's rabbinical Judaism.

This is important to say, because, historically, Christian teaching of the scriptures has done a dis-service to Jews and Judaism. Too often, we've oversimplified the story, so much to the point that a large number of Christians may not even understand that Jesus was Jewish! And today, one-year after the massacre at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh - it's important to name the fact that anti-semitism is alive and well in our country - and even in our faith.

Let me be clear, Jesus was not an anti-Judaism! Jesus himself was a Jew. Jesus was not anti-Pharisee. He was pro-Pharisee, and pro-tax-collector. He used the example of a Pharisee in this story, because he knew his listeners would assume that the Pharisee was on solid ground - religiously speaking. The Pharisee was understood to be a devout and model example of adherence to the faith. In fact, most of our churches would love to have a few more of these kinds of folks - folks who - attend regularly, support the institution faithfully, and sacrificially, and cultivate a deep and devout faith...And yes, most churches would love to have fewer who are judgmental, better-than-thou...etc. Most churches would also love to have a few more like this tax-collector - genuinely repentant, life-transformed, humble, grateful. And yes, most churches would prefer to have fewer- sinners, cheaters, traitors.

One thing to remember is that both were Jews. Both were pious. And God heard the prayers of both! Then, the audience would have assumed that the Pharisee would be justified. Today, we would assume that the tax-collector is justified. If we were in the place of God, able to hear each other's most personal prayers, we'd likely get it wrong!

Commentary writer, Matthew Skinner writes:

One lesson of the Parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14 comes from its insinuation that religious folks like ourselves may have a tendency to get it all wrong. Even if we could hear the private prayers of our congregation, we will misunderstand the bigger picture. To be more precise: we may misunderstand how God hears those prayers and how God regards the individuals who are praying them.

The Pharisee in the parable isn't wrong to be grateful that he isn't a tax collector. He knew that that professional choice was available to him, if he wanted to take it. But he didn't. Soaking the Galilean population as a Roman stooge might have given him an easier path toward a more comfortable life. But his faith, his privilege, or his values took him in a different direction. Thank God.

There's no arrogance in his belief that he chose or inherited a better way. Where he falls short in the parable is in his unspoken assumption that the tax collector resides beyond the limits of divine mercy. Whether he actually hears the tax collector's prayer or not, he wrongly assesses the tax collector and his dignity. What's even more tragic: he misunderstands God.

Conventional readings of this text reduce this story to a binary. This one is good, that one is bad. Such a simplistic reading misses the greater lesson. The point is, we'd do better not to judge one another. We'd do well, to listen to, and learn from one another. We'd do well to remember that the circle which God has drawn around who is worthy of grace, is wide, and wider still. Anne Lamott says there are

basically just three prayers - Help, Thanks, Wow! In telling this Parable, Jesus imagines what it would be like for God to hear all our prayers. Not just the ones we read on Sundays.

I don't know if this widely known, but the thought of private prayer is a relatively new concept - as reading silently. Most people didn't read silently until the early days of mass printing. So to go to the temple and read was to read out-loud. To go to the temple to pray was to pray out loud.

In our practice, however, we pray quite differently. Every week, we recite carefully written prayers. One such prayer is the prayer of confession and hope. Other traditions include an assurance of forgiveness, but we sorta roll that into that one prayer - perhaps as a way of separating ourselves from our higher church cousins who believe a priest is the mediator between God and humanity. Perhaps as a way of softening the blow of having to make our confession!

Most days, unlike the two in this parable, we pray our most sincere prayers in silence. I've sometimes wondered what I would hear, if we were all to pray those prayers out-loud. I confess, sometimes, I think it would be quite helpful to have the power to read your minds, to have insider knowledge of your prayers, that I might better know how to preach, teach, lead, guide, and support you throughout each week. Sometimes ministry involves a little more guesswork than I think it should. I try to remind folks that, actually, your pastor can't read your mind. Sometimes I need you to tell me what you need, think, feel, and pray for.

Church, I confess, sometimes, I think it would be quite helpful to read your minds, to be in God's position, and have insider knowledge of your deepest prayers... that it would help me know better how to preach, teach, lead, guide, and support you throughout each week. Sometimes ministry involves a little more guesswork than I think it should. I often try to remind folks that, actually, your pastor can't read your mind. Sometimes I really do need you to tell me what you need, think, feel, and pray for.

I also am deeply aware that even if I were able to read your minds, I'd probably still misunderstand. It's a good thing that God is God, and we are not. Ending - Psalm 51:17 - A Psalm Jesus had probably memorized well... goes like this: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Authentic Humility - Gratitude - Tender-heartedness - Compassion - Grace - these are the things which God notices. These are the things I pray for in my own heart. And, Church, these are my prayers for you this week. May God teach us all what it is to pray rightly.

Amen.