

Psalm 65
Luke 18:9-14

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 23, 2022

Two Prayers in the Temple

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Old Testament Lectionary Lesson from Psalm 65 is a psalm of thanksgiving for the God of our salvation. The occasion for this communal hymn may have been thanksgiving for an abundant harvest. God answers prayer, forgives sins, performs awesome deeds of deliverance, and crowns the year with bounty. Listen to verses 1-13 of Psalm 65. . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson from Luke 18 presents the familiar story of the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. The proud Pharisee acts as if his achievements are of his own doing. The humble tax collector takes up a position far off from the alter, recognizing his unworthiness. Listen to verses 9-14 of Luke 18. . .

Sermon

Have you ever known someone who thought they were just better than everyone else and deserved special treatment? Dr. Seuss wrote a story about a turtle who was like that. Perhaps you have read the story. The title is "Yertle the Turtle."

Yertle was ruler of a little pond on the island of Sala-ma-Sond. All of the turtles at the pond had everything they needed and were quite happy. They were happy, that is, until Yertle decided that his kingdom was too small. "I am ruler of all that I see, but I don't see enough. My throne is too low down," complained Yertle.

So Yertle lifted his hand and gave a command. He ordered nine turtles in the pond to stand on each other's backs so that they could become his new and higher throne. He climbed up

onto the backs of the turtles from which he had a wonderful view. But Yertle still wasn't satisfied. "Turtles! More turtles!" he called from his lofty throne. Yertle swelled with pride and feelings of importance as turtles from all over the pond came to climb on the stack of turtles which made up Yertle's throne.

At the very bottom of the stack was a plain and ordinary turtle named Mack. He struggled under the weight of all the turtles until finally, he decided that he had taken enough. So that plain little turtle named Mack did a very plain little thing. He burped! And the burp shook the throne and Yertle fell right into the mud! And now the great Yertle is King of the MUD. As the Good Book says:

Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall. (Prov. 16:18)

Jesus told the story of two men—a Pharisee and a tax collector—going to pray in the temple. He told it to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on others (Luke 18:9). Jesus said the Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). His prayer sounds like a popular 1980’s song of Mac Davis:

Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble
When you’re perfect in every way.
I can’t wait to look in the mirror
Cause I get better looking each day.

In contrast to the Pharisee, Jesus said a tax collector stood at a distance, and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). The clear contrast between the two men makes the point that we must not count on our own goodness to put us right with God. And we must guard against looking down on other people.

Now we know that in Palestine the devout believer observed prayer three times a day—9:00 a.m., 12:00 noon, and 3:00 in the afternoon. Prayer was seen to be especially meaningful and effective if it was offered in the temple; so many would go up to the temple courts to pray. Jesus tells of two such men in the parable in Luke 18.

But the Pharisee didn't go to the temple to pray to God, so much as he went to announce his own worthiness. Whereas, the tax collector went recognizing his sin and seeking mercy. When we come before God in his temple, the tax collector's prayer should be our prayer: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner;" "for we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Rms. 3:23)

According to John Claypool in his book, *Stories Jesus Still Tells* (p. 124), with the possible exception of the parable of the Good Samaritan, where a despised social outcast is seen to be spiritually superior to a priest and a Levite, no parable of Jesus could have been more shocking than this story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. For it stood over against the conventional wisdom of the day. Pharisees were devout religious people. The word "Pharisee" comes from a root word which means "pure." Pharisees sought purity in the way they observed the law, in their fervent nationalism, and in their care to avoid contact with all seen to be impure. They were the pillars of society and on the side of righteousness.

In contrast, tax collectors were at the opposite end of society. They were despised collaborators of Rome. They were seen to be—and often were—unscrupulous and dishonest. The comparison of a Pharisee and a tax collector would be about like comparing a respected Ruling Elder of the Presbyterian Church with a pimp or a drug dealer.

The Pharisee is first of all a religious person, a leader among his people, a spiritual guide for those who seek to faithfully follow God's law. He is careful in his religious practice and generous with his money. He sings the hymns—even when they are not familiar. In the eyes of

the world—as well as his own eyes—he is a good person, and we would love to have him as a member here at Midway. But the problem in our parable is not the Pharisee’s religious observance or his piety, but his inability to recognize his dependence on God. His inability to see that we are *all*, “standing in the need of prayer.”

How seductive it is to trust in ourselves that we are righteous, and hold others in contempt. We do our duty, pay our taxes, put our contribution in the offering plate each Sunday. We work hard, keep our yards cut. We vote, even if sometimes we have to hold our noses. But we may look down on someone else who is well-below our standards of what is good and proper. They probably should not sit on the same pew with us. But Jesus said this about the tax collector:

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. (Lk. 18:14)

According to *The Interpreter’s Bible* commentary:

Jesus did not justify the tax collector’s way of life, but hated it. Jesus did not condemn the Pharisee’s charities and honor, but would have approved them had they been rooted in true motive. But the tax collector had a soul open toward God, while the Pharisee was locked in himself. So the Pharisee was a cold hilltop where no flowers grow, while the tax collector was a valley low enough in sense of sin to hold the flowing stream of God’s mercy.

In the story that Jesus told about two men who went up to the temple to pray, he challenges us to avoid trusting in our own ability to fulfill the law, and rather, to humble ourselves before a merciful and loving God. Yes, trust is called for, but not so much trust in ourselves, as trust in God’s mercy.

Two men prayed in the temple that day. The first thanked God that he was not like all those ne’er-do-wells—like the tax collector. The second man prayed, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

John Claypool tells of a minister friend who was the leader of a church where there were lots of problems:

He had a dream one night, during which Jesus came to him and said, “Harry, I am not pleased with your ministry these days. I have been listening to your sermons, and you sound more like the public prosecutor than the public defender. You are so judgmental and critical and harsh with your folk.”

“But Lord, I cannot justify what some of my people are doing,” he replied.

“Whoever asked you to justify them? That’s my job. All I have asked you to do is to love those folk, and to forgive them, to wash their feet and nurture them.”

The pastor waked up and realized that he had gotten off the track of his true calling. So he decided to shift the focus of his ministry from the judge’s bench to the towel and basin. Instead of asking, “Where did you get your feet dirty, or why did you not keep yourself more clean,” he resolved to deal with their dirt as Jesus dealt with the pastor’s dirt. He then found that the joy of being a minister had begun to return. (*Stories Jesus Still Tells*, p. 138)

My friends, humility is something we have become woefully short of in America. We forget how interdependent we are. Where would we be today without parents who sacrificed so much for us, without teachers, without those who serve in law enforcement and the military? Where would we be without our Constitution and our churches, our jobs and other sources of income? Where would we be without auto mechanics and truck drivers, farmers, and people who pick up our garbage? Where would we be without doctors and nurses and pharmacists? I’ll tell you where—we would be in a world of hurt.

And where would we be without a loving and forgiving God, who sacrificed his only Son for us and our salvation. We have all fallen short of what we might have been, but there is something bigger than our shortcomings, and that is the grace of God. So let us pray with the tax collector: “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.