



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

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*30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 28, 2007*

Luke 18:9-14

Trusting in Themselves

Intro: Parables have a way of pointing to a deeper truth with very few words. Our reading this morning comes from Luke, it is a parable speaks to the heart of human nature in relationship to God and to one another. Jesus challenges us as we place ourselves in this parable. Let us listen for God's word to us.

When you consider the areas of politics, sports, or sales, there's a lot of "us and them" talk to be found out there, you don't have to go far to hear "Our team is better than your team." Or "My opponent in the elections..." or "This product is better than the other leading brands."

Those are obvious claims of something, or someone, being better than another. There are other, more subtle, ways of making comparisons that carry various kinds of biases: we hear people talk about those who live "on the other side of the tracks;" or "Metro and out state" people, there are all kinds of ways we indicate "other" kind of people. There is another way of drawing lines between people, the phrase heard in the midst of conflicts, "If you're not with us, you're against us."

This "us and them" mindset is something that has been part of the human fabric from the very beginning. When God asked Adam about eating the fruit in the garden, he immediately pointed the finger at Eve: "She made me do it!" To which Eve was as quick to blame yet someone else, the serpent. Somehow I don't think we can ever avoid comparisons. As long as we live in community, in relationships, we may always be in me/you, us/them relationships to some extent.

In today's parable Jesus tells the story of one man finding his voice in an encounter with God: He uses his voice not to compare himself to other, but only to confess his need of God. Two men go into the temple to pray. One is a proud and powerful Pharisee, the other a reviled outsider, a tax collector. The Pharisee prays in a voice that is full of himself, as

he boasts of all he has done. He does not ask God for anything; he thinks he needs nothing. He fully trusts himself to get what he needs to get by. The tax collector, in contrast, stands in the background, bows his head, beats his breast in anguish, and cries out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." That is the extent of his prayer: a confession of sin and a request for mercy. The two men then leave the temple and go back to their homes. The story concludes with the observation that the tax collector is forgiven and saved by God, and the arrogant Pharisee is lost.

The Pharisee and the tax collector were definitely from different spheres, from different communities. You could hardly imagine them coming into contact with one another – the one being the righteous purist about everything in life; the other considered a sinner by society's definitions.

Both of these men went up to the temple, entering into the presence of God in God's house. In this light, I think both of them saw themselves in a certain kind of relationship with God. Both of them saw themselves as created in the image of God. This image-of-God-ness made prayer possible and that's why I think they both could approach God in the temple. We're also made in God's image and therefore we can enjoy communion with the creator God in prayer.

But our relationship with God is not the only thing there is to faith. As we have

grown in faith throughout all the seasons of our lives, we need to have an identity that places us not only in relationship with God, but also with one another and the whole of God's creation.

The Pharisee felt right in his relationship with God because he believed he didn't break any of God's commandments. But what he failed to observe was his relationship with other human beings. He was quick to acknowledge sin in the life of the tax collector, giving reason for alienating himself from the tax collector and other sinners. And through this the Pharisee failed to recognize sin in his own life, the sin that alienated him from other human beings.

The question is then posed to us. We may come to church here knowing of and confident in our own relationship with God, but what about our relationship with others and with God's world? As we look once more at our alienation from other people and God's creation, we can see that indeed we have fallen short.

Here we can learn from the tax collector. All he could say in the temple was, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" In those seven short words, he placed himself, all that he was, at the mercy of God. And he knew he was totally dependent on God's grace, his trust was in someone outside himself.

Both the Pharisee and the tax collector went up to the temple as persons who thought they knew where they were. The

Pharisee knew of his place before God, one in which he followed the laws and was righteous in all he did as a religious person. But he had failed to grow in the faith that recognizes that a relationship with God is more than a one-way street. He had a feeling of pride in himself, but there was nothing new in his relationship with God as a result of his prayer. And so he went out from the temple the same man, trusting in himself above all.

The tax collector, on the other hand, went out justified. In his humility, he emerged a new man, knowing that God's grace extends even to sinners like himself. He trusts God to be full of mercy. And he finds his voice, through his prayer.

Jesus tells this parable to teach about prayer. Elsewhere in scripture we hear that was that persistence in prayer pays off, this morning the warning is not to be "presumptuous in prayer." Jesus focuses here on knowing what to say and how to say it when we approach the throne of grace in prayer. Learning to pray means having to find our voice. God desires prayer that authentically expresses who we are. We cannot fool God in our prayer. Does the Pharisee really think God believes everything he spouts in his prayer?

The Pharisee thinks that prayer is all about the one who prays. The tax collector, however, senses that genuine prayer happens when we are no longer the center of the universe.

Prayer is not detached from the rest of our lives. Faithful prayer will manifest itself in our relationships with others. The author Kathleen Norris quotes a sixth century monk saying that "If prayer is a matter of concern to you, then show yourself to be merciful." The Pharisee shows no mercy toward the tax collector and other marginalized characters. He refuses to hear their voices or even grant the possibility of their having something worthwhile to say to him, let alone to God.

Prayer is a union and a dialogue with God, a joining of earthly desire and heavenly mercy. Faithful "prayer has the effect of holding the world together." The prayer of the Pharisee – the perspective of one who sees everything as centered on himself – has the effect of tearing the world apart. In all our praying during difficult days, we should take care that we and our nation are not at the center, but that the whole world is lifted up to God, including those we consider enemies. The humility of the tax collector, who could do nothing other than throw himself on the mercy of the Lord, shows Jesus' hope that the language of our faith would be God-directed, other-centered. The tax collector places himself honestly before God and finds himself freed from his silence. He becomes somebody, by the liberating action of God's mercy. He gains his voice. We have come here today from many walks of life, from many experiences. We carry with us that which makes us who we are – joys and sorrows, concerns and burdens, deep feelings and

outlooks on the world. How will we go forth from here this day? And as we pray, do we pray with a sense of trusting ourselves first and foremost? Or will we turn to our God, saying have mercy on us - trusting in God's grace? Amen.