

**Sunday, July 28, 2019**

**The First Reading is from Psalm 5:1-3:**

<sup>1</sup> Give ear to my words, O LORD;  
give heed to my sighing.

<sup>2</sup> Listen to the sound of my cry,  
my King and my God,  
for to you I pray.

<sup>3</sup> O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;  
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

One: The word of the Lord

All: **Thanks be to God**

**The Second Reading is from Sirach 35:1-22a:**

*Note: This text is found in the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. This text is part of the collection known as the Apocrypha. Although, most Protestants do not recognize the Apocrypha as part of our Biblical Canon, our Catholic Sisters and Brothers do. Commentators referred to this text for the parable we are exploring today and so it is appropriate to hear from the writer of Sirach, the work known as Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Ben Sira. Sirach lays out expectation about our relationship with God for the righteous (Sir.35:1-5), and the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the humble (Sir. 35:16-22)*

<sup>1</sup> **The one who keeps the law** makes many offerings; <sup>2</sup> **one who heeds the commandments** makes an offering of well-being. <sup>3</sup> **The one who returns a kindness** offers choice flour, <sup>4</sup> and **one who gives alms** sacrifices a thank offering. <sup>5</sup> To keep from wickedness is pleasing to the Lord, and to forsake unrighteousness is an atonement. <sup>6</sup> Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed, <sup>7</sup> for all that you offer is in fulfillment of the commandment. <sup>8</sup> **The offering of the righteous** enriches the altar, and its pleasing odor rises before the Most High. <sup>9</sup> **The sacrifice of the righteous** is acceptable, and it will never be forgotten. <sup>10</sup> Be generous when you worship the Lord, and do not stint the first fruits of your hands. <sup>11</sup> With every gift show a cheerful face, and dedicate your tithe with gladness. <sup>12</sup> Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford. <sup>13</sup> For the Lord is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold. <sup>14</sup> Do not offer the Lord a bribe, for he will not accept it; <sup>15</sup> and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality.

<sup>16</sup> The Lord will not show partiality to **the poor**; but the Lord will listen to **the prayer of one who is wronged**. <sup>17</sup> The Lord will not ignore the supplication of **the orphan**, or **the widow** when she pours out her complaint. <sup>18</sup> Do not let the tears of **the widow** run down her cheek <sup>19</sup> as she cries out against the one who causes them to fall? <sup>20</sup> The one whose service is pleasing to the Lord will be accepted, and his prayer will reach to the clouds. <sup>21</sup> The prayer of **the humble** pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal; it will not desist until the Most High responds <sup>22</sup> and **does justice for the righteous**, and executes judgment.

One: The word of the Lord

All: **Thanks be to God**

### The Third Reading is from Luke 18:9-14

<sup>9</sup> ***Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:*** <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> 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.***”

One: The Living Word of God

All: **Thanks be to God**

### The Message is entitled, *Pitfalls of Prayer*

How many of you ever take a look at the cartoon page in a newspaper? When I was in corporate America, I never missed a Dilbert as the comic strip poked fun at the environment I worked in daily. Well, there are cartoons on just about any topic, so given our texts today, I figured there had to be cartoons on prayer. Instead of opening the newspaper though, I went to the google search engine and typed “cartoons on prayer.” Here are some that popped up:

- A young child says to her parent, “Do I have to say a prayer, if I don’t need anything?”
- A wife says to her husband as he prays at the breakfast table, “You can pray all you want, it’s still going to be oatmeal.”
- A young boy bruised from a school yard brawl prays, “Please make us instruments of Thy peace starting with Bucky Sims.” Obviously, the name of the young boy who caused the bruising.
- A child says to his mom who just opened his bedroom door and walked in while he was praying, “This is confidential, Mom. Do you mind?”
- The night before a man is going to approach his boss he prays, “Please give me strength to ask for a raise without my voice breaking into an annoying falsetto.”
- A young child asks his mom, “When the teacher says, ‘Heaven help me,’ is that praying in school?”

And then there is the young boy who prayed, “I won’t enumerate my trespasses. You know my work [God].” I am sure the tax collector could have prayed these very words as he stood far off and beat his breast before he prayed saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

There was also a cartoon about the heavenly prayer desk. The stack of prayers for “please” was ten times higher than the stack of prayers for “thank you.” And today we heard a prayer of thank you from Luke’s Gospel, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Well, I am not sure that this is the thank you that the cartoon had in mind.

Our Pharisee in the parable though doesn’t stop with just ‘thank you’, instead he continues praying. Filled with pride he reminds God that he fasts twice a week, when Jewish Law only requires a fast once a year. He also shared that he tithed not only what he earned, but

on all that he possessed. In reality his prayer had nothing to do with giving thanks to God; it was merely self-congratulating. It is as if the Pharisee wanted to make sure that God knew just how good and righteous he was.

Two very different prayers: A prayer of thanksgiving; a prayer of confession.

Two very different postures: Standing by himself center stage with body confident and proud; standing far off, head bowed, beating his breast.

Two very different outcomes: humbled; justified.

What about us? What do our prayers reveal about us? What do our prayer postures reveal about us? Are our prayers mostly in the “please” category; a petition for ourselves or a supplication on behalf of another? Are our prayers words of praise and thanksgiving for the God whom we worship? Do we enumerate our trespasses or merely confess to God, “You know our work?” What do our prayers reveal about us?

This parable is unique to Luke, but it doesn’t stand alone. It follows the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, which we will tackle the last week in August to keep in step with the parable lessons for our children this summer.

The context of these two back to back parables is Jesus preparing his disciples for his final week in Jerusalem. Preparing them for what is to come: his arrest, crucifixion and death. In the first parable Jesus encourages his disciple not to lose heart and to pray always. This second parable though takes a different approach, for Jesus starts with a warning, which Eugene Peterson translates like this: “Jesus told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people.”

Given this warning, the Pharisee’s prayer shouldn’t really surprise us, for pride can certainly be a pitfall for prayer. It reminds me of another cartoon I came across, which showed a pastor kneeling in silent prayer with this thought bubble above his head, “Ya, Ya... I know this is more about me than it is about you.” So many times, our prayers are more about us than they are about God. It seems natural to stay wrapped in our own stuff, which translates into prayers that are all about us.

The Pharisee was enamored with his own stuff, his own moral goodness and this is definitely not only a pitfall of prayer, but also a pitfall of faith. When our prayers and our practice of faith becomes a moral score board, then we have missed the heart of what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

As Mother Teresa once said, ““God has not called us to be successful. God called us to be faithful.” It is not about our successful moral performance – how often we fast, how much we give or even how many hours we serve. It is not about our performance, but about the condition of our hearts.

But, let’s not just focus on the Pharisee. What about the tax collector? Although, the parable concludes, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God,” we should remember that the tax man’s actions are not condoned. The behaviors that led to his confession were abusive and unjust. He colluded with the Roman Empire against his own people. In this parable he went home justified, but did his confession lead him to stop his abusive and unjust practices? We don’t really know, but we do know about another tax man named Zacchaeus who received mercy. Zacchaeus said to Jesus, “Look, half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone anything, I will pay them back four

times as much." Forgiven, Zacchaeus changed his ways. Yet, a potential pitfall of prayer is to confess our sin without changing our ways, without turning towards the ways of God.

Given that there is not blanket condemnation for the Pharisee or blanket praise for the tax collector, what is the point of the parable? Commentator J. R. Randolph Harris suggests it has to do with the difference between the prayer of the Pharisee and the prayer of the tax collector. The Pharisee's prayer sets himself apart from others, for he considered himself superior to others, especially the tax collector. Whereas the tax collector's prayer drew him towards others as he realized the detrimental impact of his behaviors on others. One moved the person praying away from his neighbor. The other moved the person praying towards his neighbor.

What do our prayers reveal about us? Are our prayers drawing us into relationship with others or are our prayers solidifying fractures in our relationships? In this parable, I hear haunting whispers of one of Jesus' hardest commands, "Love your enemies." The Pharisee may not have considered the thieves, rogues, adulterers, or the tax collector he mentioned as his enemies, but he certainly was dehumanizing them. He was suggesting that he deserved God's attention and love more than they did. He was God's star pupil, not them.

Well this dehumanizing behavior – "God, I thank you I am not like the other people" – plagues our world today where name calling and belittling has become all too common. Where only some are with us and on God's side and everyone else is not. Relationships are fractured and the fracture is solidified by "defriending" or ex-communicating or worse. This parable warns us that if we exalt ourselves and dehumanize and demean the other, we will be humbled and the stories in Luke continually remind of this truth. For the "other" is more often than not the one who is justified in Jesus' parables. Of course, the Gospel of Luke reminds hearers again and again of the great reversals of God's realm: "the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted up," "blessed are the poor, woe to the rich," "the exalted will be humbled, the humble will be exalted."

Do you remember the context of this parable? Jesus is preparing his disciples for when he would no longer be physically present with them and we live in such a time, my friends, so we must pay attention. Do our prayers reveal the "Pharisee" in us? Do we need to remember that Jesus calls us into relationship with others, even those we might consider our enemy? Do our prayers reveal the "Tax Collector" in us? Do we need to confess our sins and turn from our sinful ways?

What do our prayers reveal about the condition of our hearts? Are they hardened or pliable? Are they tuned to the ways of God or to self? Are they filled with pride or contempt of self? Are they claiming to be unworthy or resting in God's love?

"Do not lose heart and pray always," says Jesus to his disciples and to us. Even though pitfalls are present in all of our prayers, the invitation is to pray always. And prayer is simply and profoundly our relationship with the mystery we call God. And when we open ourselves to a relationship with God through prayer, as C. S. Lewis once said, "[Prayer] doesn't change God – it changes me."

Prayer changes us, because we are invited to experience that we are deeply loved by God, not because of what we have done or left undone, but simply because of who God is. God is love and like the psalmist who marvels, "What are human beings that you are mindful of

them," we, too, can marvel that God is mindful of us. And so, loved by God, we can come to see others through this lens of love. We can come to love others, as God does.

And so, I suggest that this parable reveals to us whether or not our prayers draw us ever closer to God as well as to our neighbors. If our prayers are not doing so, then I suggest we have succumbed to a pitfall of prayer and we need to ask God to humble us, for we are surely exalting ourselves.

"The prayer of *the humble* pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal; it will not desist until the Most High responds." Indeed, "Give ear to my words, O LORD; give heed to my sighing. <sup>2</sup>Listen to the sound of my cry, for to you I pray." May our prayers be humbly offered to the Holy One who hears and responds, with the expectation that we will be the ones who are changed, drawn closer to God, to our neighbors, and even our enemies. Amen.