

*Sermon from the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C*

23 October 2022

*St. Matthew's Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit*

*Jl 2:23-32; 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Lk 18:9-14*

I once had a spiritual director who introduced me to an Eastern Orthodox prayer called the “Jesus prayer.” You are meant to say, over and over again, a form of the tax-collector’s prayer that we just heard from Luke’s Gospel: “*Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*”

The prayer is said as a kind of mantra that’s supposed to help you pray *unceasingly*, as Paul commends we do in 1 Thessalonians (1 Thes. 5:17–19). It developed in the Eastern ascetic tradition, and is still practiced by monks and lay people all over the world as a method of cleaning and opening up the mind and heart to God.

And, ya know, I actually came to like this form of prayer later.

Though, my spiritual director would never get to observe this, because, for some reason, before I had anything to say about it myself, he told me that I should drop the “sinner part.”

But, no sooner than that, he interrupted himself, and told me to forget the whole thing, and then recommended I take up a different, *apparently less self-abdicating-prayer*, called the “*Maranatha*,” which has you say, simply: “Come, Lord, Jesus.” It’s a welcoming prayer, developed by another ancient, desert ascetic.

Not bad. Though, I guess my director’s “spiritual director tool kit” of prayers never told him about where the *Maranatha* prayer came from. It’s taken from Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians (16:22). And, it’s no less penitential than the other prayer. Here’s the whole verse: “*Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come!*” That’s it!

My spiritual director’s anxieties around things all-too-penitential is generally shared today. We talk about guilt and shame a lot now. I’m not that old but I can still remember that there was a time when this wasn’t the case. It’s true... shame and guilt can weigh heavily on people in crushing and distorting ways, that are totally contrary to God’s desires for us. So why focus on penitence and contrition, at all then?

But, then again, on another level, it’s also just not popular or cool to be a penitent person, like the tax collector. It’s dishonorable to look like this, ya know—it’s just all too “*religious*.” It’s far better, socially, to be a kind of self-styled “spiritualist,” if anything — spiritual but not religious. It’s better not just to *be* but to also actually *look* self-sufficient, like someone capable of standing on their own two feet. But, such standing, though, *is* the main difference between the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Jesus’ parable.

“*He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*”

The Pharisee’s prayer, you won’t be surprised, isn’t one that Christians have found useful. To be clear, my old spiritual director did not recommend this one. “*God, I thank you that I am not like other people.*” But, I think it is what many people think when they encounter someone who seems, well, religious, or, all too penitent. We find them unsophisticated, plebeian. This penitential posture just seems all too offensive, fearful, groveling, and undignified. It isn’t a good look. But isn’t this what the parable suggests how God wants us to be? It would seem.

The Pharisee, Jesus says, in the parable, stood near the temple, holding his head high as he surveyed the crowds of apparently lame, bad, and unfashionable, people — the unclean. And, his disdain reminded him of his superiority, though, today, this likely wouldn’t be demonstrated in a collection of religious practices—fasting and tithing, especially—but, more likely, what one does not do, namely, anything that would seem to take things too seriously, especially

one's sins. Today's "spiritual but not religious Pharisee" doesn't quite fit the mold of the biblical, one, but they have a lot in common.

But, then there's the other one, the tax collector, who Jesus says, stood far off. As a tax-collector he was isolated from the center of Jewish cultural life because he was despised by the general public for his profession. He stood far away, not just because of his humility—knowing that his sin separates him from God—but exactly because he couldn't presume to find company upon the temple's courts. He is without community, without belonging. And, he is the one whose pleading-posture Jesus praises.

And, it is this posture that's more coherent with the Bible's depiction of who we are before God as a whole. Indeed, it is this consistency: "*For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite.*" (Is 57:15).

So, this is it, our right posture before God: contrite. I think most of us know this. We are to become like the child "humble" and "meek" (Matt 18:3-5). Yet, surely, most of us would still hesitate to go so far as to "announce" our weakness, if, at least, "only" before God.

Besides, isn't this the posture that the world teaches us to despise? Self-assertion, self-fulfillment, these are the prizes of the immitable, the bold, the confident, ... the proud! In short, those who *win*: that's who we wanna be.

It's worth noting how amazing it is that both Christianity's cultural despisers and the Biblical witness agree about who we all are before God: we are all weak, dependent children.

Our natural appetite seems to be for something more "applicable" to having a self-secured life, something that helps us succeed, find happiness—which, we're told, if we're going to find it—we must learn to suppress, even "hate" our weakness. Yet, the Scriptures, are so consistent in beckoning us to know our weaknesses and to make them known before the Lord, but why?

We get our first clue as to why Scripture recommends knowing our weaknesses by observing the Pharisee. The Pharisee—in his self-satisfaction—finds himself alone. In this pride, he is separated both from his brethren and, most importantly, from God. To be clear, Jesus did much of what the Pharisees did: He prayed, fasted, and tithed. Jesus' parable, then, is not designed so much around identifying the culprit as a particular Jewish group—here, the Pharisees—but to identify a certain habit, a disposition, that generates in practices, perceptions, and attitudes that are set in opposition to the way of the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees' prayer—"God, I thank you that I am not like other people"—starts off like a thanksgiving Psalm. But he never actually gets around to naming what he's thankful to God for. Instead, for God's acts, the Pharisee, substitutes his own. In our time, there are Pharisees of the religious sort; I'm sure you've met them before. But, I think most of the time it is more likely that the Pharisee of today is one that looks disdainfully at genuine humility, and skeptically at the self-less.

Now, to be clear, it's not as if the Pharisee doesn't know about sin. He knows about it intimately. He avoids it. The problem was that *all* the Pharisee could see *was* himself. The Pharisees' problem is that he cannot see God. He has no eyes that can see the Lord, the kingdom of God, in his midst (!), **in the very midst of human sin and failure** (Lk 17:21). That's the point.

The Pharisee places himself and, presumably, those like him, in one camp and all others in the category of thieves, liars, and adulterers, the tax-collector, far off, among them. Today's Pharisee does the same, though in more fashionable terms. But, among all the condemned who is there? There is Jesus himself, just among them. So the tax collector is different only in one way: he has Jesus. Together with the blamed, the outcasts, and sinners, there he is—there is Jesus.

Jesus himself never has to ask for God's mercy. Though the Son of God became incarnate and is like us in every way, except that he is without sin. He remains turned totally to the Father— totally poor, childlike—obedient not to his own but his Father's will. He is always his prayer: "Not my will, but *Your* will be done." Indeed, Jesus *is* God's will, in the flesh. So, as Israel and the tax-collector cry together, "*God have mercy on me,*" Jesus *is* mercy come among us. And, there, on his cross, the world's unrighteousness is smote upon the awesome righteousness of God.

So when the tax-collector, the penitent, stands before God, yearns for God, we know that God responds. God responds to the cry of the scattered and lost sheep, even the farthest one. Christ sees us and plunges himself into the deepest and darkest places of our very being, so as to confront it with his very Passion. On the cross, we see that God holds nothing back. His whole life is spilled out and falls into the open hands of the hurting and the lost—the food and drink of the New Covenant.

So God doesn't meet the penitent with hallowed condescension nor abandon the tormented conscience. No; the Psalmist's "contrite and broken heart" leads finally to the coming of the Lord of All. The One come himself among us in the dirt and rejection and pain of life—though still God, totally and utterly (Phil 2:6-8).

The point of contrition, penitence, isn't about being bent over, anguished, and self-loathing. This would make one into a somewhat perverse, mirror-image of the Pharisee: a self-obsessed, albeit anxious and self-hating person. What the sincere knowledge of sin is about *is finding God*. That's what's different about the tax-collector—he has Jesus. It's not surprising that this text is assigned to us in the Lectionary so close to Thanksgiving. Penitence, finally, gives way to the posture of thanksgiving in the knowledge of the Lord who has come to us.

And so, Jesus ends his parable by saying: "*I tell you, this man [the tax-collector] 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.*"

The humble are finally those who welcome the Lord's offer of renewed life. This is where such recognition has driven them. To be exalted. They are exalted by receiving that life that God gives, which is his own, exalted life. So just like Joseph is for his brothers, is the prodigal son in his Father's eyes, Christ *is* for all of us. We are the sins of Israel turned toward the Lord, the prodigal turned again toward his or her Father, the stranger welcomed in.

So, when, in James, for instance, we read, "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble,*" (James 4:6) we see the dignity of the penitent revealed in Jesus, who's taken the lowest chair so as to raise us up. He is their crown. The penitent, the weak, the downcast—they compose that holy throng placed before Love himself: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Just as Jesus says: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God* (Matt 5).

Amen.