

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC
November 16, 2014
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God, I Thank You ...
Luke 18:9-14

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 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!’ 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.”

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“There is no such thing as a stupid question.”

You’ve probably heard that saying before. Adults say it to children; teachers say it to students. The thought behind the saying is that it’s better to learn – to ask whatever question you might have rather than keep your mouth shut and not learn something new. Asking questions is how we come to understand the world around us and how we grow, so it’s a good thing.

Of course, there are debates about whether this saying is actually true. I know teachers who will tell you that they know from experience that there are, in fact, stupid questions. My college roommate could provide the example of the time I asked her when the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade is.

The late astronomer and scientist Carl Sagan qualified the saying a bit. His take on it was, “There are naïve questions, tedious questions, ill-phrased questions, questions [posed] after inadequate self-criticism. But every question is a cry to understand the world...[which means] there is no such thing as a [stupid] question.”

Fair enough.

In the church, we have a similar way of thinking when it comes to prayer. If I were to ask you if there’s such a thing as a stupid prayer, most of you would have the same immediate response – of course not.

When it comes to prayer, we believe that nothing’s off limits. It’s better to pray and to be in conversation with God than not to pray at all. We might take Carl Sagan’s lead and offer some qualifiers. We might say it’s true that there’s no such thing as a stupid prayer, but

that doesn't mean that there aren't misguided prayers or that we should expect God to give us exactly what we pray for every single time.

But...If we were to look for an example of a prayer that is stupid, this morning's Gospel reading would be the place to find one.

That Pharisee. Bless his heart, that Pharisee. Can't you see him? He's the one who sauntered into the temple in his best robe, not a wrinkle or stain on it anywhere. He's wearing the prayer shawl that his grandmother gave him when he was twelve, and he's positioned himself at the front of the temple where everyone can see him. He keeps his eyes closed while he prays – except for when he hears the footsteps of someone coming in the temple, and then he sneaks a peek to see who might be watching him. And of course, he uses his overly-affected, I'm-very-important-and-pious voice when he prays - "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector...."

Seriously? What kind of person prays something like that? Who says that?

How about a person who is

arrogant	self-centered	pretentious	conceited
proud	pompous	self-righteous	obnoxious

We can think of all kinds of words to describe the Pharisee, and I bet you even know people like him.

Maybe it's your neighbor down the street who, for the life of her, can't help but one up you whenever you share something going on in your life. You've stopped talking about what's going on with your kids at school because she always has an experience that tops yours. You've decided not to mention the trip your family is planning for next summer because you know she'll interrupt you to tell you about the ritzy resort where her family will be staying on its next vacation.

Maybe it's your co-worker who has mastered the art of the humblebrag. A humblebrag, for those of you who haven't heard that word before, is a statement that's supposed to be self-effacing but really just comes across as boastful. A statement like "I'm so exhausted from my two-week vacation in Hawaii" or "It's really difficult to keep my nine bedroom house clean."

Most of us know people who will toot their own horns to whomever will listen. Ugh.

God, we thank you that we are not like those people – the one-uppers, the humblebraggers – or even like that Pharisee in this morning's parable.

Wait.

Herein lies the danger of this parable. It's the danger of all of Jesus' parables really. They seem so accessible, so familiar, on the surface. Preaching professor Tom Long describes the complexity of parables well. He says, "Rebellious sons leave home, farmers cast seeds, bridesmaids ready themselves for the wedding, pompous characters pray ostentatiously at church – these scenes from the parables appear to be both instantly recognizable and [very] preachable snapshots of human life..."

"But the more we get to know the parables, the less confident we become of our understanding of them. As soon as we reach out to grasp a parable's seemingly obvious truth, a trapdoor opens and we fall through to a deeper and unexpected level of understanding."

As soon as you feel like you get it – that Jesus is telling us not to be like the Pharisee who prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people," we find ourselves thanking God that we're not like the Pharisee. We're doing exactly what we disliked the Pharisee for doing.

That Jesus is a clever one.

So there's got to be more going on here other than Jesus' instruction on how not to be an arrogant jerk in church. He's been teaching his disciples and the Pharisees about prayer, so maybe that's it.

Jesus talks about prayer a good amount in Scripture, and an underlying theme to his teachings about prayer is that our prayer lives say something about the kind relationship we have with God.

Theologians use a Latin phrase to talk about this relationship – *lex orandi, lex credendi*. In English, the saying goes, "the law of prayer is the law of belief." The idea is that the relationship between prayer and belief is circular: what we pray about reveals what we believe and what we believe shows up in our prayers.

In other words, what we pray about, when we pray, what we're willing to say to God (and what we're not willing to say) – those things are reflections of what we believe about who God is and who we are in relationship to God.

When we pray for a family member to be healed of his cancer, we're living out a belief that God is capable of healing that person. Whether God does heal that person is another thing, but the prayer itself demonstrates a belief about God's power.

When we keep something from God, when we don't bring a particular concern to God because we feel like it's selfish or trivial, we're living out a belief that God can handle some things in other lives but not others AND the belief that we are the ones who get to make that distinction.

When we pray in the little moments of our lives – sitting a stoplight in traffic on the way to work or when walking the dog through the neighborhood after dinner – as well as the big moments – when the doctor lays your just born baby on your chest and when your 91 year old father doesn't wake up in the morning – we're showing what we believe about how God cares for us. Those prayers remind us that God is with us in the seemingly mundane moments of ordinary life and in the unforgettable moments that change our lives.

Prayer and belief are intimately connected.

So when the Pharisee comes to the temple to pray, and he spends the whole time praying about himself and singing his own praises to God, we learn something about this man's faith.

The Pharisee is telling the truth about himself. He's not making things up. He does live a righteous life, he fasts, he tithes – shoot, he probably kisses babies as he walks down the street. He's a good guy in all of the respects.

But his prayer tells us that he doesn't need God's grace in his life. Or at least he doesn't think he does. He's good on his own. Yeah, he'll pray, but only to tell God how good he is.

This is where the tax collector – the one who should be the bad guy in the story since he's the one who cheats people and breaks the law – strangely enough, he becomes the one we're supposed to emulate.

The tax collector – the guy over there in the corner of the temple who's making a scene with all of his weeping and beating his chest – that guy gets it. He knows he's a broken man. He knows that he needs God's mercy, that he needs God's forgiveness, and that he's not worthy of either.

His prayer – “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” – speaks to his understanding of his need for God and his dependence on God.

Because he gets it – that he's not able to earn God's love – he's actually the one who will appreciate it the most. He'll recognize it for what it is – grace.

The truth is that all of us – even when we're doing really well – all of us need God's grace in our lives. All of us need the reminders that we're ultimately dependent on God and that we aren't in charge of everything. We're most fully ourselves when we're aware of these truths.

Let's go back to the Pharisee for a minute. What's going on with him? Don't you wonder that a little bit?

If he were a church member who shared this prayer as a glimpse into his faith life, I'd wonder why it is that he feels the need to tell God all that he's doing for God, why it is that he needs to compare himself to the tax collector who's known for being less-than-

respectable and certainly less-than-faithful according to the law in order to feel like he's earned his place with God.

In some sense, I feel for the Pharisee. It must be exhausting to feel like you have to prove yourself all of the time. No, it IS exhausting to feel that way. I've been there. You probably have been too. When so much of our lives are wrapped up in what we've accomplished and what we have to show for ourselves, it's hard to believe that God would love us regardless of any of those details.

We live in a world that expects people to boast about themselves and what they've done. Just ask Justin Glass or ??? who are high school seniors in the thick of the college application process. In that process, being yourself often doesn't feel like enough. You have to have good – no, exceptional – grades, a plethora of extracurricular activities, community service experiences, glowing recommendation letters – to get into the school of your choice.

The same is true for those of you who work in the corporate world. There's a lot of pressure to meet sales goals, to be an innovative thinker, to be one step ahead, to have all of the answers, to beat your competition...

Really, it's true for anyone who's in any kind of relationship with another human being. We have expectations for one another, and we're constantly trying to live up to those expectations. We spend a lot of energy trying to be the kind of person we think other people want us to be.

So it's hard – maybe even the hardest thing – to know in the depths in your being that God isn't really interested in seeing your three-page, single-spaced spiritual resume, to know without a doubt that God loves you unconditionally. God loves you. Period. That's it.

Take a minute to think about that feels like.

It feels good, doesn't it?

In Jesus Christ, you've been set free. Free to be yourself with your faults and your flaws and your gifts and your graces. Free to do things for God and for others – not because you have to, not because you're worried that God won't love you otherwise – but because you're so grateful for God's love that you can't do anything else.

That's the message we seek to embody week-to-week, day-to-day, hour-to-hour as the body of Christ, the church. Sisters and brothers, that's our call – to live confident in God's love for us and to help others come to know that love in Christ too. Together, we get to offer the

prayer, "God, thank you for always loving us, being merciful to us, and being with us."
Amen.