

PRAYER AND PREJUDICE

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, October 28, 2007
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, DC

*(Please note that this text represents my **preparation** for the sermon, but not the actual sermon itself, since I preach without notes or a manuscript in front of me.)*

Text: Luke 18:9-14

⁹[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The 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. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But 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!’ ¹⁴I 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.”

I'm sure all of us here this afternoon would agree that the attitude of gratitude is a good thing. We've been taught since we were little children to be thankful for whatever blessings we may enjoy. Author Anne Lamott says the two best prayers she knows are "Help me, help me, help me," and "Thank you, thank you, thank you." In the current issue of *Guideposts* magazine, bioethicist Stephen Post identifies five different ways that "giving thanks is good for your health":

- DEFENDS: "Just 15 minutes a day focusing on the things you're grateful for will significantly increase your body's natural antibodies.
- SHARPENS: "Naturally grateful people are more focused mentally and measurably less vulnerable to clinical depression.
- CALMS: "A grateful state of mind induces a physiological state called resonance that's associated with healthier blood pressure and heart rate.
- STRENGTHENS: "Caring for others is draining. But grateful caregivers are healthier and more capable than less grateful ones.
- HEALS: "Recipients of donated organs who have the most grateful attitudes heal faster."¹

With all these positive outcomes associated with the attitude of gratitude, I would think that the Pharisee in Jesus' parable would be very healthy indeed. His prayer is, in Anne Lamott's words, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." He is grateful for his religious stature and his religious practice in his community. Casting a side glance at the tax collector who sits humbly at the rear of the sanctuary, the Pharisee expresses a sentiment we've all felt at one time or another: There, but for the grace of God, go I. "The phrase is usually traced back to the Protestant martyr John Bradford (c. 1510-55), who on seeing a group of criminals being led to their execution, remarked, 'But for the grace of God there goes John Bradford.'"²

There's only one problem with the Pharisee's attitude of gratitude: he's only thankful for himself. He's thankful that he's not like other people. Standing apart from other worshippers in the Temple, the Pharisee has set himself apart in a kind of holier-than-thou posture. His moral goodness and spiritual uprightness are his own project. He's grateful to himself for making himself the kind of person he is. And because he knows that "thank you" is an important prayer, he wants to be sure that God knows how thankful he is.

The Pharisee is, in the words of Mary Luti, a colleague of mine who is Senior Pastor at First Church Cambridge Congregational UCC in Harvard Square, someone who has "appointed himself monitor of other people's lives, and when he says he's not in any way like them, he believes the illusion. His contempt for them is proportionate to his assumption that what he has accomplished, he has accomplished. Full of what he thinks is self-knowledge, he is instead merely self-absorbed; he doesn't understand that these two things are not the same."³

When I read or hear this parable, I think, There but for the grace of God go I. Lord, I'm thankful that I'm not like this Pharisee: proud, contemptuous, self-absorbed. We Christians are accustomed to thinking of biblical Pharisees as self-absorbed Jews who are not like us. They represent works-righteousness, and we know that works-righteousness is a bad thing. Because we're not like the Pharisee, we can dismiss him and go merrily on our way. Except...

¹ Stephen Post, "The Power of Gratitude," *Guideposts* (November 2007), pp. 78-79.

² http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/23/messages/1087.html

³ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=628>

We **are** like the Pharisee. *I* am like the Pharisee. Jesus' parable is addressed to **us** (or at least to those of us who trust in ourselves that we are righteous and look down on others). In the wonderful Elizabethan language of the King James Version of the Bible, this story is known as the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. In my liberal Democrat Doug Clark version, this is the parable of the Pharisee (me) and the Republican. We could say that this parable calls me to confront my inner Pharisee.

So what about the tax collector? Tax collectors in Jesus' time were often rogues and thieves. They worked for the occupying power, Rome. They were paid on a commission basis—the more taxes they collected, whether fairly or by extortion, the more money they earned. Exorbitant rates of taxation were part and parcel of the spiral of economic violence in the Galilee of Jesus' time. Many small landowners had to sell their property to pay off their tax debts, and they became day laborers instead of farmers and artisans. Tax collectors were a key cog in the Roman imperial machine of economic injustice and exploitation.

Which is why I'm more than a little surprised to hear about a tax collector who has come into the temple to throw himself on the mercy of God. He's a sinner, to be sure, but not because he's an adulterer. He's a sinner because he steals from the poor and gives to the rich; he's a kind of reverse Robin Hood. He's not troubled by an introspective conscience; he's troubled by the work that he does, troubled that his livelihood depends on exploiting others. And he's troubled enough that he takes the first step toward changing the work that he does. He comes to the temple, not to pray Help me, help me, help me, not to pray Thank you, thank you, thank you, but to pray I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. His is not a prayer of pride or prejudice, but a prayer of confession.

Just as the Pharisee has set himself apart from other worshippers in the Temple, so the tax collector has set himself apart from other tax collectors outside the Temple. These two men share common ground in this sacred space—only they don't yet know it. The Pharisee is too caught up in his own righteousness, the tax collector is caught up in his own sinfulness.

So back to the Pharisee. There but for the grace of God go I. I thank you, God, that I'm not like other sinners—especially this tax collector. The Pharisee trusts in himself that he is righteous and despises others. But Jesus is not telling this parable to criticize the Pharisee. He's telling this parable so that his followers, his disciples, won't trust in their own righteousness and look down on others.

I confess that as a good white middle-class liberal in the Calvinist tradition, I've learned not to trust in my own righteousness. And I try not to look down on others—well, not too much, anyway, except for those Republicans who won't vote to override President Bush's veto of the renewal and expansion of the S-CHIP program. While I don't feel disdain toward those who are different from me—politically, ethnically, socioeconomically, whatever—I often feel discomfort when I'm in the presence of those who are different from me. I know I'm not alone in this. And I know I need to be self-aware about my own personal structures of racism and classism and narcissism.

One of the things that attracted me to this church is your vision of becoming a multiracial and multicultural congregation, of becoming the "beloved community." I know from my own experience that this kind of vision is not one that can be fulfilled without a lot of hard work, without an openness and a willingness to change some of our attitudes about worship, about music, about prayer, about fellowship, about evangelism.

For the most part, Protestant churches tend not to be very diverse. We Protestants tend to want to affiliate with others who look like us and think like us and talk like us and dress like us. We birds of a feather flock together. We're quite comfortable in a homogeneous flock. But if we want to become truly multiracial and multicultural, we'll need to be prepared to move out of our comfort zone.

So the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector really does speak to us today. Jesus' parable is a call to the Pharisee who lives in each one of us to stop building up her or himself by looking down on others. It's a call for self-examination instead of self-absorption. Instead of telling God how thankful we are for all that we've accomplished, we need to seek God's mercy for all that we have not accomplished. Along with Anne Lamott's favorite prayers—"help me, help me, help me" and "thank you, thank you, thank you"—we need to pray the tax collector's prayer: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."