

The Parable of the Proud
22 Pentecost C

“All who humble themselves will be exalted” – Luke 18:14b

For some, being humbled is an everyday occurrence. I count myself among those. It seems that I don't have to work very hard at being humbled. Yet humbling me before someone younger is another matter. I become aware that false humility is a snare of my pride as well. As with anyone, people want to be affirmed. Compliments to our work, our behavior and when we are taking care of ourselves measures what we are not who we are. People can take themselves too seriously.

The saying, “It's not easy being me,” can be debated by the person by your side. This is especially true when it requires adjustment to personalities that have strong egos. Strong egos lead and they are needed in society. I could not imagine Barack Obama or John McCain running for the office of President without the inner strength of a powerful ego. Certainly these strong ones trust in themselves. And if asked on national television what their weaknesses are it would be a test of true humility.

True humility: what might God be looking for when we approach him in prayer? Last week's parable of the unjust judge and today's parable present challenges to our prayer life. They instruct us to pray with the determination of the widow and the humility of the tax collector. The former might be called the “Promise of Persistent Prayer” and the other the “Peril of Presumptuous Prayer.”

There is an intended lesson for his disciples. Jesus chooses a wide contrast between the characters of Pharisee and tax collector intentionally. Certainly disciples would struggle with their own pride having walked with their Lord. He wanted them to examine how they might have the same attitude as the Pharisee in their own hearts. And he chooses a notorious sinner as a tax collector. Tax collectors were despised for the common practice of taking more money from people than they should.

A Pharisee was at the top of the food chain in Jewish society. It would be easy to be presumptuous. A bishop or a priest might be put in a comparable position in the church. And there is nothing worse than clergy who are full of themselves! But we all had better check ourselves for the Pharisee's attitude. The religious right or left have at times been found to trust in their own righteousness.

The last verse of the gospel exposes everyone who would exalt themselves because of their position. It leaves us wondering why Jesus bothered to make examples of these men and why one was justified over another? We are left to figure that out for ourselves.

What we are given to distinguish these believers is the posturing of their records. The Pharisee had a record to be proud of and there was nothing wrong with the good things he had accomplished. Though the Pharisee offers a prayer of thanksgiving it is self-serving. His heart is not filled with gratitude but is filled with contempt. It might be similar to a white man praying by thanking God he was not born black!

Prayer is the only link of the Pharisee to the tax collector yet his prayer separates rather than unifies. The Pharisee presuming he has need of nothing being perfect asks nothing of God. How sad that when we pray to a God who will give us bread rather than a stone people will fail to ask something of substance!

The tax man however makes no mention of his accomplishments. His physical stance suggested he was ashamed. Refusing to enter on to the holy ground of the temple court he can not lift his head. The common posture for prayer was not head bowed and hands folded. It was looking up to God with hands raised. In contrast to the Pharisee who asks nothing the tax collector boasts nothing. His prayer echoes the opening words of Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God," adding the self designation, "a sinner." Nothing more is reported of the tax man's prayer. Though he boasts nothing, the tax collector asks of God His very heart. For the very heart of God is His mercy!

Is there a lesson here we can take home? Remembering that the religious will gather together and the outcasts of society will tend to worship God alone outside the walls of worship is a bit unnerving for me. It suggests that being in the temple is not enough and is irrelevant to being heard by the Just Judge of our hearts. Where we are standing in relationship to the launch-pad of prayer matters little. It's not the form or the platform that should be our concern. In our prayer our concern should be for those we can see both within and outside these walls.

Perhaps it may be the very reason why people outside the church walls think something grave will happen if they enter a church. You've heard your un-churched friends say when they hear you are going to church: "Lightening will strike me if I step inside" or

“The ceiling will cave in.” We can tell them that what they think is a monastery is actually a hospital where people can get better. There are no guarantees on the doors as we come in. Yet perhaps there should be a disclaimer – “Sinners Rub Elbows Here. Use hand sanitizer upon leaving!”

The nature of God’s grace is paradoxical: It can be received only by those who know and have shown mercy. Prayer is meant to be both an abrasive and a salve for the soul. Getting ready to pray to God is a work that takes place on the inside. I hope that prayer is a constant in your life. May we all avail ourselves of a humble heart as we go to the throne of grace. Let the Spirit scrub behind our ears around the eyes and especially the tongue. May these tingle with humility as God sanitizes, purifies, and makes us holy. Amen.