

Luke 18: 9-14 “#2People@Prayer” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/27/19

One of the consequences of being the youngest in a family with 3 older siblings is that I was too young to participate in sibling pranks and jokes. Instead, I became an easy target for practical jokes and consistently believed whatever I was told. My sister Marilyn had me convinced that whenever a car failed to use its blinker, it was because blinkers weren't invented for that particular model. I hold fond memories in college years of my best friends moving all my belongings from my dorm room to our hall bathroom and then another time my roommate hung a wall of newspaper from ceiling to floor right down the middle of our room and then stuffed the entire half of my side with newspaper. And then all by myself, there is the memory of hearing on the radio station that the phone company would be cleaning the dirt out of the phone lines that day. It was announced they would be doing this by blowing air into the wires in the switching station. The problem is that the dirt comes out of the earpiece and mouthpiece of the phone, granted this was back in the dark ages when we had dial up phones. This dirt could therefore dirty the rugs and furniture in your home. Consequently, the phone company was asking folks to get plastic baggies and put them over the handsets of the phones to protect their belongings. I like so many others went to the store, forgetting that the date was April 1<sup>st</sup>, and bought plastic baggies. The run on plastic baggies was so huge that the radio station had to place a retraction on the story. Come to find out, the phone company does not blow into the telephone wires to clean the dirt out of the lines. Anybody with any understanding of the way the system operates (which isn't me) would know that they suck the dirt out. I was reminded that the word “gullible” was placed in the dictionary for folks like me.

Jesus' parable today is a bit of Jewish humor at the expense of prominent religious leaders. This was a common practice for some rabbis who would joke about their own tendencies towards self-righteousness. Scholar Ron Allen notes that maybe we would be wise to develop some Christian humor at our own expense, to tell jokes on ourselves in order to help keep us humble. My gullibility is just one of the many ways I try to keep humble. We would miss the point if we place all our emphasis on the Pharisee, as this story is about everyone who can slip into self-righteousness from time to time. It really doesn't matter where you fit on the theological or even political spectrum, from liberal to conservative, it's easy to fall into the trap of a narrow world view. This, in turn, leads to judging others depending on whether they are for us or against us, and those who are against us are not worthy to breathe the same air.

Dualistic thinking where "either/or" and "right/wrong" approaches divide people into categories is not only hurting God's church, it is causing what I fear will be irreparable damage to our country. Dualistic thinking may be necessary in some places for making legitimate comparisons and fostering appropriate differentiation, but too often it slides into a hierarchical way of thinking. In this "good, better, best" culture we live in, such "either/or" thinking quickly assumes a superiority over a person or group. We pray the prayer of the Pharisee "God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else," when in fact we are exactly like everyone else. We are all sinners. We have all made mistakes and are in need of Jesus' wisdom and path, of God's forgiveness and mercy. There is no one that can claim they are more righteous than another, no one. By taking sides and ascribing superiority to one side or the other, the downward spiral intensifies. Soon one group is vilifying the other and derogatory interactions get out of control. Contempt frequently bubbles up while denigrating others helps to validate the self. People

regress to childish responses and nothing gets accomplished. I don't know if this sounds at all familiar to you, but it sure does to me.

In an effort to combat such dualistic thinking, Jesus tells a story of two characters who come to church to pray. One has embraced dualism in all its glory, clearly believing in a hierarchy when it comes to the worth of a person. The other clearly recognizes his stature as having fallen short of the glory of God and is most concerned with his relationship to God and others. These are two opposite examples of prayer. One way is death-dealing, the other is life-giving. One is smug and confident, the other is anxious and insecure. One upholds the law at all costs while the other probably bends the rules at times. Both interestingly are tied to each other with respect to their wealth; the tax collector takes money from the working poor while the religious leader profits from the money taken. Incidentally, it is estimated that the average peasant family in Jesus' day paid up to 83% of their income in taxes – puts a whole new spin on higher taxes, doesn't it? Back to our characters – The self-proclaimed saint parades in and heads up to the center of the room while the self-proclaimed sinner “stands at a distance,” as if the physical distance from the sacred center expresses his feeling of spiritual alienation. The first one stands up, the second looks down. The Pharisee puffs out his chest in pride, the publican beats his breast in sorrow. In shocking narcissism, the Pharisee prays loudly “about himself,” the tax collector can barely pray at all. Here we see not just the importance of prayer as a part of the Christian life, but the fact that how and what is prayed reveals a lot our relationship to God and others. Finally, take note that both characters have their prayers answered. The Pharisee goes on and on about his accomplishments but asks nothing of God, so that is exactly what he gets. The tax collector simply says, “Be merciful to me, a sinner.” And

Jesus shares that he is the one who is not only forgiven but is justified, that is made right, before God. Jesus concludes, "If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself, you will be honored."

Pretty straightforward stuff, isn't it? Except when we start to think about our own lives and then the lines become blurred about who we might be in the story. That becomes a problem, you see, because just as we ask ourselves who we are, the Pharisee or the tax collector in our actions and attitudes, we are falling into that ceaseless trap of comparisons again. It is so addicting, this comparison thing. We are always wanting to compare ourselves to something or someone, but the minute we do, we have become the Pharisee. The key is to try and get around that comparison thing and simply come to God, broken as we are and be honest, acknowledging what we have done, who we really are, and asking for forgiveness without self-justification, blame, scape-goating or judgment. There are times that can be particularly hard for me as I confess there are a lot of people in this world I have judged. I have come out of some conversations with others secretly thinking "Thank God I don't think like that!" In those moments, I have to immediately stop and call myself back to reality. God isn't about who is "better than," "smarter than," "prettier than," "richer than," or "holier than..." God does not discriminate, God does not compare, God loves us all...equally. When we go to God in prayer, we are encouraged to stay away from comparisons. It doesn't matter that the praying neighbor nearby might believe in God differently than we do, it doesn't matter that the one praying in the room with us may be walking outside what we think is righteous or Christian behavior. When we make it matter in our relationships with God and others, we have stepped outside righteous behavior ourselves. We have stepped into a role that is not ours to assume.

I have come to believe what Martin Luther King discovered as he watched the hatred grow between blacks and whites in the Civil Rights Movement. He could not be on a side; neither the Black Panthers nor the KKK held the key to the future, even though each group claimed it did. King found his better way when he read Gandhi's biography, writing on the book's cover page, "This is it!" From that day forward, he invested himself in nonviolence, often referring to it as the "strength to love." As both country and church divide up sides in ways unlike we have seen since the Civil War, I wonder if we have come to a point where no one side can fully take us where we need to go. The time for judgmental attitudes and polarizing actions is over – or at least it should be. We are so accustomed to divide and conquer but now is the time to unify and love. Staying together, working together for truth, integrity, and the common good of the least powerful, most vulnerable in our community is the priority God sets before us all. And the first step comes in our humble approach to prayer, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Amen.