

“Going to the Temple to Pray”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
October 27, 2019

Luke 18: 9-14

There are many things that I appreciate about this worship space at John Knox. The natural light, the fact that everything up here on the chancel is moveable, the acoustics for all the music we are blessed to receive in worship. I know that for some, the sanctuary that we had previous to this one held a special place in their heart, and it was hard to see that structure be torn down nine years ago. But I also am grateful to the vision and commitment of many, many people who followed the Spirit’s leading to build this space for future generations of our congregation.

For those of you who did not know the old sanctuary, the worship leaders – the liturgists and ministers – would sit up front, behind the all-brick pulpit. We sat in what I called the throne chairs – two large chairs which are now in the church library. If you ever want to feel like a king or queen, feel free to sit in them! But when I would sit up there, I always felt detached and disconnected from the congregation, because it felt like we were sitting back in a corner, physically separated from the rest of you.

Which brings me to one of the things I appreciate the most about our current worship space. Whoever is offering spoken leadership in worship – liturgists, preachers, lay leaders – they come up from the congregation to the front. I had a professor in seminary who once said that the ideal way for ministers to lead worship is to be sitting in the congregation and then come forward to preach, as that symbolized how we are called out of the Body of Christ to proclaim God’s Word. I remember thinking at the time that seemed kind of odd and strange, and perhaps that was because I was looking forward to the time when I would be sitting up front with all eyes on me. That’s probably how a lot of young seminary students feel!

But now, we are living out every Sunday what my seminary professor described and believed. And I truly value and appreciate it. Why? Because when I sit down here each week, I feel like we are all in this together. And when I walk up these steps to preach, I’m coming up here knowing all that you have experienced and lived through – what you are bringing with you to worship each Sunday morning.

Your worry over a child who seems to only follow the wrong road with unwise decisions. Your concern over a loved one who continues to struggle with illness and disease. Your stress over financial needs being met while looking for good, solid employment. Many of you come here

on Sundays with a lot on your minds. Which begs the question: how do life's stresses influence you when you worship God?

When you come into this space, are you looking for answers to life's problems? When you sit down in these pews, are you seeking challenges which will stimulate your mind throughout the week? When you get in the car to come here, are you concentrating on who you need to talk to while you're here, so that you can check things off your mental list? Or are you unsure what you are seeking when you sit in these pews, but when you got up this morning, you had a sense that you needed to be here?

"Two men went up to the temple to pray." That's how Jesus begins this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. And perhaps that is the image which stuck with me this morning: what are we bringing in our hearts, minds, and souls when we "go up to the temple to pray." I believe how we read this parable reflects a great deal why we come to worship God in the first place, and then perhaps, as we worship God, how that experience transforms us for the week that is ahead.

JoAnn Post is a Lutheran pastor, and she writes the following: *My niece refused to offer a memorized table grace. She insisted that she be allowed to pray extemporaneously for that specific meal. With hands folded, head bowed, and one eye scanning the table, she prayed, "Thank you, God, that Mom mashed the potatoes and made gravy. Thank you, God, that there are enough rolls for me to have two. I don't thank you, God, for the beans. Amen."*

Her prayers were highly contextualized and painfully honest. She was, at the age of five, master of the ancient prayer form and interpreter of tradition. She was a tiny Pharisee in pigtails.

Jesus has a bur under his saddle about the Pharisees. It's a shame. They served a vital role in Jewish religious life because they believed the law to be a living, breathing thing. Pharisees held the received (written) law in one hand and the lived (oral) law in the other, interpreting texts in context. Pharisees prayed as did my niece - faithful to both ancient forms and to daily reality . . .

(In the parable, the Pharisee) settles into a prominent spot in the temple, mirroring the posture of the Pharisees Jesus pillories in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, "the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogue on street corners." The Pharisee we meet in temple today is that guy.

Hands folded, head bowed, one eye scanning the room, he prays. Thank you, God, for my faithful meal practice. Thank you, God, for my charitable attitude. I don't thank you, God, for thieves, rogues, adulterers, and tax collectors, except that I am not one. Amen. Like my niece, he is probably not a fan of green beans, either.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was never a nuanced or sympathetic character. Tax collectors were regarded as collaborators

with the Roman government, traitors to their neighbors. I'm sure there were others in temple that day who held uncharitable thoughts about the tax collector.

But unlike the Pharisee, who assumes the peacock's position in temple, the tax collector cowers in a corner, head bowed in shame, beating his breast as though a professional mourner. Wet with tears, bruised by his own fists, he cannot bring himself to meet heaven's eye. He has nothing for which to be grateful. He is in temple not to glorify himself or God, but to repent. And his repentance is deep, dark, painful – he repents not what he has done but who he is. The tax collector knows, on a cellular level, that regardless of what he does for a living, he is in his bones sinful and unclean.

At parable's close, the Pharisee returns to his wood-paneled office to further interpret the law. The tax collector, who has no choice about his vocation, returns to the street to bilk his neighbors. Jesus applauds the tax collector, the sinner who knows his need. Jesus declares him "justified" – even though the tax collector will soon go back to his (corrupt) ways, even though he does not have the courage to seek God's face. God sees him anyway.

*The Pharisee is also seen, though it is not God's eye he wants to catch. His performance in the temple is not prayer but promotion. He doesn't ask God for anything. He is right with himself. As Jesus says, "He has his reward" (*Christian Century*, October 9, 2019: 19).*

This parable has many lessons, but the one which stands out for me is this: what is our motivation for being here? Why do we come to this place? Is it for our own ego to be boosted? Is it out of a sense of obligation and duty? Is it because we genuinely need what God provides us – in community, in worship, in study, and in service? Does our motivation change from week-to-week, month-to-month, season-to-season? Why do we go to the temple to pray? What do we bring with us when we worship the Lord our God?

I thought about motivation on Friday when I was here at the church. If you are only here on Sundays, then the only way you would know that other things happen in this space during the week is by looking at the calendar in your bulletins. Those are just words and numbers on a page of paper. They don't represent the lives that are impacted by what goes on here during the week.

I thought about that on Friday, as I counted fourteen cars in the parking lot, all of whom were here for the weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at 10am. Fourteen cars representing at least fourteen individuals who were motivated that day to come to that meeting because they knew if they didn't, they might slip back into addiction. They were motivated by accountability to one another, and how that mutual respect supports them after they have been down the dark tunnel of alcoholism. Their motivation, like the tax collector, is recognizing they

cannot do this on their own – they are totally dependent on God to be made healthy and whole. It is uplifting and fulfilling every Friday to see these courageous men and women walk through our doors, for they are just one of the many groups of neighbors who gather in this space in humility, so they might grow stronger as children of our living, loving God.

It saddens me that more in our church do not come on Sundays. I believe this reflects a larger shift in our culture. More people go away on the weekends, or choose to participate in activities on Sundays, or have to work on Sundays in order to make a living. Or, as a friend of mine commented in a recent conversation on this topic, more of us are simply needing sabbath rest from all that the world throws at us, and often Sundays are that day for quiet and renewal. Instead of viewing worship as part of that rest and renewal, going to church is seen as another busy activity.

That should be a siren call for the church today. We must be in discernment and conversation to know how to invite, support, and encourage people to see God’s community as their community. We must be open to new ways of gathering as Christ’s Body, but at the same time asking ourselves and others, “What motivates us to go up to God’s temple? Why is that important to us?” And then ask others, “Why might that be important to you?” We all bring so much with us to worship, but it doesn’t have to be a burden we carry alone. That is the strength of the community of faith – a community that is motivated to love, serve, and support in the midst of all that life throws at us.

Two men went up to the temple to pray. One went down to his house justified. How will we return to our homes today after worshipping the Lord our God? May our ears and our hearts be open to hear what God calls us to do this day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.