

Sermon, Proper 25, October 27, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

‘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!”’ (Luke 18:13)

Jesus presents us with a simple, yet powerful, story about how we humans approach God in prayer. He tells us, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." The Pharisee is described as “standing by himself.” He has set himself apart from the others who have come to pray. On the other hand, the tax collector has barely allowed himself entrance into the temple. He is “standing far off,” not even able to look up into heaven.

Here is a sidebar on the Pharisees. The Pharisees of Jesus’ time were the “good guys.” They were the ones who were most observant in prayer, most devoted to the Torah. The word ‘Pharisee’ means one who is set apart, one who aspires to a holy life. Their goal was to preserve the essence of the Hebrew people’s covenant with God while having to endure living in an occupied territory. As one commentator I read observed, Jesus’ story is only shocking because the Pharisees were so highly respected. (Br. David Vryhof, SSJE) This particular Pharisee does the *right* thing by fasting and tithing, and by relying on his strength of character. However, somehow his actions have become, not about God, but about his own apparent spiritual pride. He goes so far as to harshly judge the tax collector. He shows contempt.

If anyone seemed beyond redemption, it would be the tax collector. In Jesus' time it was necessary for the Israelites to convert Roman coins to Jewish coins to pay the temple tax. Roman coins had the image of the Emperor Tiberius. As Roman emperors were considered divine, using the coins or even handling them was tantamount to breaking the first two commandments. Tax collectors made their money by charging an exorbitant exchange rate. This made tax collectors not only Roman collaborators, but ritually unclean. Their sin was spiritual as well as unlawful. Yet it is the tax collector in Jesus' story who shows humility. He recognizes he has hit bottom.

Appealing to God for mercy is his last resort. I think of the African American spiritual: "Standing in the Need of Prayer" that goes: "Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." Why is it we humans are always doing the right thing as a *last* resort? (That's a rhetorical question!) The tax collector's prayer is honest, from the heart. Jesus shows us God's mercy has no bounds. It flows where it will. There is a beautiful round in our hymnal by William Billings: *When Jesus Wept*. The first line is "When Jesus wept, the falling tear in mercy flowed beyond all bound." This is the nature of God's mercy, that it flows "beyond all bound." When we allow our prayers to flow in this way, the Apostle Paul has assured us that, "...The Spirit helps us in our

weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” (Romans 8:26)

In our Psalm today we hear the Psalmist say to God: “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.” (Psalm 65:9-10) In the Old Testament reading we hear God tell the prophet Joel: “...I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28) God continually pours out blessings and grace upon us.

One of my favorite prayers in our prayer book is this (slightly paraphrased):

“Almighty and everlasting God, from whom comes every good and perfect gift: Send down upon our... congregations... the healthful Spirit of your grace: and, that they may truly please you, pour upon them the continual dew of your blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honor of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*”

For me, there is a flow to prayer that seems to share its nature with the flow of God’s mercy. However, for prayer to flow unimpeded, it needs to be offered with humility. Prayer is not chiefly about what we can do for ourselves. It is about what God is doing in us and through us. The word humility shares a root with the

word ‘humus’ or ‘earth.’ To have humility literally means to have our feet on the ground. To pray with humility means that our love for God can well up within us, mirroring God’s compassion and mercy. Shakespeare expresses this wonderfully:

“The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes...

It is an attribute to God...

We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy...”

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

The simple plea the tax collector uses in his prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” is the basis for what we have come to know as the Jesus Prayer. The “Jesus Prayer” probably originated among the desert Fathers and Mothers in 5th-century Egypt. It is a form of centering prayer later embraced by the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is often prayed like this: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” or, simply, “Jesus, have mercy.” The prayer is repeated with the ultimate goal being that it settles in one’s heart, thus becoming the “prayer without ceasing” spoken of by Paul. (1 Thessalonians 5:17) It is often

the prayer I use when I do not know what else to pray. When I am especially anxious it is helpful to use prayer beads: something tangible to hold in my hands.

When my father was in his mid-eighties, he had a stroke. It wasn't a catastrophic stroke, he recovered quite well from it, and had several more pretty-good years. However, he was hospitalized, and was in rehab for a time, so I went down to North Carolina to see him. My flight home after my visit to Massachusetts happened to fall on Pentecost Sunday. There was an 8 o'clock service at my father's church that I had time to attend before taking off. I had attended his church a number of times in the past, yet I was not prepared for how I was embraced by the small congregation at the early service.

The priest knew my father well, having visited him a number of times over the years. At the announcements, he acknowledged my presence, and assured me of the church's prayers for my father. I have never forgotten the kindness and comfort offered to me, a worried daughter. After the service a woman came up to me, introduced herself, and then offered me a lovely set of prayer beads. It had already meant much to me to have this church's prayers. Having this tangible sign—literally something to hang on to—was a gift indeed. Later I was able to pass on the beads to someone else going through a difficult time. She, in turn, gave them away: truly a circle of prayer. When I was ordained to the priesthood, I received another set as a gift from a seminary friend.

