

*Pentecost 22C
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An Uncomfortable Truth

Once when we were in Colorado for a youth ski trip, we decided to stop by a large church in Denver on Sunday morning for worship. It was a very uplifting service, fantastic music, great preaching, and a whole lot of nicely dressed people. I remember walking out behind an older woman who commented to her friend, "Wasn't that a great service? [That why I like coming here – I always leave feeling good](#)".

Many times, that's what I hope for people leaving St. Mark's as well. Why else would I dress up in a pink prom dress? (had to be there to see the 'Little Bo Peep' children's message©) Yet I can't stop wondering if Jesus would agree? I can't stop wondering if this parable about a Pharisee and a Tax Collector isn't holding up a mirror and asking all of us to take a good long look at our desire for "good feelings" in our relationship with God.

Jesus tells this parable as a [continuing comment on prayer](#). Last week he used a relentless widow to tell about the need for persistence in prayer, because **prayer is more than answers**. Today he begins with the assumption that there are actually people out there who think they are better than somebody else and look at others with contempt! I can't believe there are people who do that! **Thank God I'm not one of them!** 😊

And that's why this parable is so powerful. Just when you think you have it figured out, just when we have found a way to "feel good"- that we are not like that self-absorbed, self-congratulating Pharisee- we become just like him. In his teaching about prayer, Jesus wants us to know that **prayer helps us trust in God not in ourselves**.

The Pharisee started out well: "God I thank you"- but the thanksgiving was for himself and his right way of living. From his elevated vantage point of self-righteousness, the only way to look at others is to look [down](#) on them, and that is where the Pharisee goes very wrong. He has all the right actions and all the wrong attitudes.

Someone once said, "Christ sends none away empty but those who are full of themselves". The Christian life is one of constant emptying, of coming with open hands, of recognizing that even the most saintly action does not make us saintly people. Only God's grace can do that. All that we do is a [response](#) to that grace and so none of the credit belongs to us. All of it belongs to God.

We began our worship service with a remembrance of baptism to remind us again and again of God's undeserved love for us. Baptism has been called a "[celebration of a demotion](#)." Unlike graduations or other ceremonies of recognition, baptism "is a rite in which we step down, not up." Yes we are claimed as God's child but we are also made servants of all. [We are elevated to a position of humility](#).

And that is a tough place to be in the world. **Prayer helps us trust in God, not in ourselves** but there is a big part of 'ourselves' that doesn't really like that. Sin still infects our lives. Every right action, every turn toward the right path, brings with it the temptation to pat ourselves on the back and feel good about what we've done.

Eugene Carson Blake, a Presbyterian minister who was the president of the World Council of churches nearly fifty years ago said that in this story, "Jesus is saying to every one of us that the moral result of **prayer ought always to be a humbling** experience and, **therefore**, for most of us **quite unpleasant**."

That does not mean prayer or even worship for that matter, is about self-loathing. Too often in its preaching about the reality of sin, the church has focused on making people feel bad about themselves. But that is really just another form of self-justification. In effect **we think God will have mercy on us because we are so good at confessing how bad we really are!** That logic is just as twisted as the Pharisee's and it can be equally dangerous because once again we begin to judge others who don't confess their sins as much as they should.

What we need is a focus on something other than feeling good or feeling bad about ourselves. We need a focus on the **truth** and that is what prayer offers us. **Prayer helps us trust in God, not in ourselves.** Prayer helps us tell the **truth** about ourselves, AND then hear the truth God speaks back to us. Yes we are people who fail, but we are also people for whom Christ died. That gives us a worth beyond all measure and a power that propels us to get behind our neighbor to help him/her along instead of standing out front and criticizing.

There is reason to rejoice and celebrate the good things that are being done. It is good to look at all the actions taken by this group of disciples over the years and give thanks. But we give credit where credit is due. **God is doing these things** through us. To God be the glory, not to us. That must always be our prayer so that we learn to **trust in God, and not in ourselves.**

Let us go out today with a new kind of prayer on our lips. Let it be the prayer that is truthful, even though it may be uncomfortable. Let us not worry about feeling good about ourselves but instead delight in being loved by God. That is a joy that cannot help but transform us and help us to live in rightness with God and with all those around us.

Let us pray,

My God I thank you that I am just like every other person- unworthy of your love yet saved by your grace. For reasons I don't understand, you have blessed me with things I do not deserve. Never let me be satisfied, thinking all this is because of me, but help me to be humble like my brother who sits beside me, like my sister in front of me. Let our lives connect so that we might learn from one another to trust in you and your goodness. Amen.