Sunday, October 25, 1998
TWO PRAYERS
Luke 18:9-14

How do you measure yourself? How do you arrive at some self-understanding of who you are and what you are? Are you a good person or a bad person? How do you know? Are you a smart person or a dumb person? Are you lucky or unlucky? How do you know? Are you successful or a failure? What is your standard of judgment?

To give us guidance on these questions, Jesus told a story. Or as Luke says in the introduction to the parable, "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." It's a story of two simple, short prayers, but they reveal more about the two men who said the prayers than you might imagine.

Let's look more closely at the two men who prayed these short prayers. How are they the same, and how are they different? And what do their prayers tell us about them?

Both of these individuals in the story came out of a tradition that took it for granted that prayer is not a substitute for right living, but ought to be its inspiration, its blessing, and a help in being able to tell the difference between right and wrong.

The Pharisee is a man who is in dead earnest about his service to God. After all, we can tell at once whether a person's heart is in something when it touches his stomach or his pocketbook. The Pharisee, according to Jesus, fasted and sacrificed. He cut down his standard of living for God. He gave one-tenth of his income to the church. For him, God was at least as real as the money in his billfold and bank account.

He was the kind of person that churches today still depend on. He helps pay the bills and is faithful in every way. I'd love to have a congregation full of people with his devotion — people who care enough to be faithful in their commitments, who tithe on their income, who are not on church welfare, and who thank God that they can support the church.

It's true, in our time as it was in Jesus' day, that people like the Pharisee hold the community together and keep the faith with diligence and passion.

The tax collector, on the other hand, exerts a corrupting influence on the community. There is no hint in the story that after his prayer of confession, he will go home and quit his job. Maybe tomorrow he'll again take money from his neighbors, hand some over to the empire, and put aside some for himself. The Pharisee, in contrast, works faithfully and sacrificially to preserve the community and its traditions.

When we remember these differences, it's not so evident why Jesus proceeds to praise the tax collector and condemn the Pharisee.

Sometimes our standard answer is that everything looks quite different in God's eyes than it does in ours. This might be true, but it raises more questions. Is our judgment of no value at all? Does God always turn our values upside down?

Doesn't God appreciate the fact that the tax collector in this story is probably a crook and the Pharisee a very ethical person? What kind of God is this that accepts the prayer of the tax collector and seems to reject the prayer of the Pharisee?

At the end of the parable, Jesus said, "I tell you, this tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The more I've read and studied this parable, the more it's become apparent to me that to understand the message of this story, we must first accept the fact that both characters in the story are found in each one of us. We are not totally one or the other.

There are many of you listening who have accomplished something good, who in your home, business, or profession have dealt honestly with others when you could have cheated. And there are also those who have not been able to control their urges or desires — maybe you have been a bit underhanded when you should have been above board, or maybe you are too consumed with ambition. You may be disgusted with yourself and unable to cope with it.

The point of the story is not to see the tax collector as honorable and the Pharisee as a creep, or the other way around. We need to know that it's easy to fall into the trap of the Pharisee and pray, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." It's also easy to fall into another trap and pray, "I thank you, God, that I am not like this proud Pharisee: I am a sinner. That's the way human beings are, and that's what I am, but at least I admit it, and therefore I am a little better than the rest of the lot. I am an honest person, God, because I don't kid myself. Let your angels sing a hallelujah over this one sinner who is as honest as I am."

Whether we are more like the tax collector or the Pharisee, those of us who claim to be religious need to be especially careful during the devout moments of our lives. Even humility is a virtue that is not immune to temptation.

There's the old story of the Bible teacher who told his class the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, and after explaining it at some length, folded his hands and closed his presentation by saying, "Now, students, let us thank God we are not like that nasty Pharisee."

Note that there are a lot of similarities between the tax collector and the Pharisee. Both want to be in the presence of God. Both are in the temple. They are not simply seeking God in nature. Many who do this are only looking for a warm religious feeling but otherwise want to remain as they are. The God of nature does nothing to judge them or change them.

Both characters in this story want more than that. They enter into the holy presence of God. They expose themselves to God's will and claim. They have a respect for religious tradition. They are not trying to escape into cheap non-commitment. Both give thanks that there is such a thing as the mercy of God and that they can approach God.

The fact that both approach God with a prayer of thanksgiving shows they have penetrated deeply into the mysteries of God. Beginners and casual Christians usually confine their prayers to asking God for something, especially when they are in trouble. Then, in the next moment, they have forgotten God. It was only a passing panic that exploded into prayer.

But why, according to the story, is the tax collector's prayer of thanksgiving accepted by God and the Pharisee's prayer criticized by Jesus?

It has to do with how each of these two individuals evaluates themselves and the standards they use to arrive at their self-understanding. And that's where the story also speaks directly to us.

The Pharisee measures himself by looking downward when he tries to determine his rank in society and before God. He chooses the tax collector as his standard. Then, of course, the difference becomes obvious to him. Sure, the Pharisee knows he has his faults. He doesn't claim to be perfect. He knows the temptations that trouble him, but he has controlled them.

He doesn't give thanks that God has spared him from being a thief, adulterer, rogue, or tax collector; he gives thanks that he is not like them. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people..." Really? Here, he crosses from the grammar of gratitude into the grammar of excessive pride. It can be a very subtle line, and we almost never notice when we cross it, but we do it all the time. What betrays us is an unexamined refusal of kinship. It shows every time we use "us-them" language.

He believes himself singular. "I am not like the rest." He's appointed himself the monitor of other people's lives, and when he says he's not in any way like them, he believes the illusion.

You can feel the distance in his use of the word "tax collector." Now he has stopped praying and started peeking. Coolly, he measures himself against a neighbor and is quietly pleased with the difference.

From the other side, the same is true. Had the tax collector measured himself against the Pharisee and despaired at the difference, his prayer would have been just as false. It's the comparative sideward glance that distorts prayer. The Pharisee measured himself first by looking sideways and then downward. Using this kind of measurement, he is content with himself. He isn't challenged to make any improvements because he already considers himself so much better, according to the standard he is using for measurement.

When we measure ourselves only by looking sideways and downward, it's easy to become too contented with ourselves as we are. We can always find someone who is worse than we are. I worry about a religious faith that leads only to contentment.

There's a story about a mountaineer who established quite a reputation for himself as a marksman. He loved to show visitors the target rings on trees and fences with a bullet hole in the center. Asked to explain the secret of his skill, he said, "It's easy. I just shoot and draw a circle around the hole."

We not only learn something about the Pharisee's understanding of himself by measuring downward, but we also learn about his understanding of God. He sees God as a passive audience whose job is to applaud when the report is done. The tax collector, as wrong as he is about so much, at least has his eyes right. He doesn't even notice the Pharisee but is standing far off, entirely lost in his poor prayer. Jesus said that he would not even look up to heaven. He is not comparing himself with anyone. He is looking within himself. Both men are praying about themselves, but one of them is scanning the room, while the other is oblivious to all but his own condition.

The Pharisee's kind of self-measurement by looking downward always produces false pride. This can be illustrated by our desire to gossip. Why is it when we are together that we get such pleasure in sinking our teeth into other people? What is the root of this strange delight we take in discussing, in whispers and feigned horror, the private weaknesses and supposedly secret love affairs of prominent people?

Because at such moments, we feel so much better about ourselves and can say with a certain air of moral superiority, "Such things don't occur in my life." Or at least, "Such things may take place in my life, but they certainly shouldn't happen to such a well-known person."

Gossip, including the gossip that fills the pages of sensational news magazines and the big headline tabloid newspapers found at the checkout counters of grocery and convenience stores, is based on a kind of self-defense mechanism. We want our own superiority to be confirmed, and we try to achieve this by being horrified at others and putting ourselves above them. Anyone who looks downward and measures themselves by the weaknesses of others immediately becomes falsely proud.

One Biblical commentator reflecting on this parable of two prayers said, "Someone should draw a cartoon of a congregation at prayer with thought balloons over each head. Worshipers might be thinking in their prayers, 'Thank God that I am not like those fundamentalists,' or 'Thank you, God, that I am not like those liberals,' or 'Thank you, God, that I am above all this.' Our capacity for smugness is astonishing. In the culture and in the church, too many of us assure ourselves and define ourselves by who we are not like, by looking downward."

The grace of God can be corrupted by spiritual vanity. However, when a person truly turns to God with a burdened conscience, they don't think of other people at all. You are alone with God. The tax collector, while he was praying, did not look sideways out of the corner of his eye at the Pharisee and think, "Surely this man is different from me, but he too has plenty of sins." This would have been true, but it's irrelevant. The tax collector measured himself upward. God is the standard.

Lest we misunderstand, the story is not saying that there are no differences between people. Some are good, and some are bad. We have to make careful distinctions all the time. If I, as an employer, were to put a faithful, respected worker on a par with another individual with sixteen previous convictions, that would not be right.

At the same time, when we are together in worship and prayer, we should not be shocked if we suddenly find an individual with sixteen previous convictions gathered with us at the Lord's table. We should instead give thanks for God's grace, which extends to this person and to all of us.

How do you measure yourself? By looking downward or by looking upward? Amen.