

For twenty-two weeks now—over the course of five months—Luke has been slowly and methodically inviting us to follow along with Jesus and the disciples as they make that 120 mile-long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Over these past few weeks, their conversation has turned to prayer.

Two weeks ago we heard about the healing of ten lepers in the region between Samaria and Galilee. As you may recall, only one of those ten returned to say, “thank you.” (And he was a Samaritan!) This encounter reminds us that gratitude goes to the very heart of what Christian prayer is all about. Recently a friend of mine posted these words as his Facebook status: “Envy is the art of counting someone else’s blessings.” We might turn that around and remember that *gratitude is the art of counting our own*.

Then last weekend we heard Jesus speaking about persistence in prayer. He sets before us a parable of a persistent widow who wears out a corrupt judge in her pursuit of justice. I suspect that most of us, when we hear about widows, tend to think of savvy, wise, determined old ladies. Fair enough; I have known my fair share of them. But I wonder if it helps us to hear that parable in new ways to picture “the widow” as someone more like, say, Julia Roberts playing *Erin Brockovich*, and taking on a corrupt legal system because she’s is out of options. Or perhaps Sally Field in *Places of the Heart*, a young widow trying to save her farm and get the crop in against all odds.

It seems to me that much of what passes for prayer in the church is just plain anemic. Sometimes we pray as functional atheists: we pray because we know that is what Christians are *supposed* to do. But deep down we aren’t really sure we expect much to happen, either in the heart of God or in our own hearts. But Jesus invites us to take note of that persistent widow and to take note of her determination and courage and ultimately her faith. And then Jesus says: *try to pray more like that*.

That doesn’t mean we will always get exactly what we asked for. I sometimes joke when I am asked to pray for good weather or a Patriots victory that I’m in sales, not management. But underneath the joke lies a more serious point. *We are all in sales; not management*. Ultimately God gets to be God. We can and should offer prayers of intercession and petition with persistence, but there is always a shadow side to such prayers because if we aren’t careful it can start to be like we are telling God how to do God’s job! We can and should keep praying for that friend who has inoperable cancer. But the answer to that prayer may not be a miraculous cure; it may be the courage and trust to die well and with fewer regrets. Or we may be praying that God would send an angel to guard over our friend in her time of need; yet the answer we get may be that God means for *us* to go knock on her door and hold her hand so that she will know the love of God through us in her hour of need. Such answers are not always the ones we want, but they may well be the answers we get; and they are not evidence that God wasn’t listening.

Today, this extended teaching about prayer on the way to Jerusalem continues as we read further from the eighteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel:

*Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 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!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

Keep in mind that these words are addressed to religious people—to us! (Atheists don't tend to pray unless they find themselves in a foxhole in the heat of battle.) It is we who need to watch out for the temptation toward arrogance and self-righteousness. There are two important phrases that set up this parable that we do well to linger on for a bit. First, Jesus is speaking to those who "trust in themselves." As Christians, we are called to put our trust in God. But especially as North American Christians, this gospel narrative runs counter to the boot-strap culture that surrounds us. We are told from a young age that we are in control of our own destinies. We are taught that if we work hard we'll get ahead (and the implication is that those who are not "ahead" must not have worked hard enough.) It is a narrative that creates a hard-hearted world, a world without mercy.

But an alcoholic struggling with addiction knows that she can't trust in herself—she has to let go and let God. A teenager battling with depression knows he can't trust in himself. Still, the narrative persists and it's a hard one to combat. This doesn't mean we need to beat ourselves up or that we are unworthy of God's love. It simply means quite literally that God alone is worthy of our trust. That saying that "God helps those who help themselves" isn't in the Bible; it's Ben Franklin. The Bible says that God helps those who cannot help themselves.

The second phrase worth noting is where this attitude of self-trust takes hold, it is almost always accompanied by a tendency to regard others "with contempt." I first became aware of the science of micro-expressions in Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*. Since that time I have become a fan of the television show, *Lie to Me*. The show is a bit contrived, I admit. But the science behind it—based on the work of Dr. Paul Ekman—is intriguing to me. Whether or not we are particularly good at reading faces, we probably all have some experience with this. Let's say you are talking to someone at a cocktail party who is trying hard to feign interest in hearing the story you are telling, but truth be told she isn't doing a very good job of masking her true feelings, and you know that if only there was a bubble over her head the caption would be very different than the polite head nods. Fear, surprise, excitement, joy—and yes, contempt: these emotions are difficult, if not impossible, to mask. And therefore even when our words and our best efforts to wear a mask are in full force, our faces betray what we are really feeling.

Contempt is a pretty big one. Dr. Ekman says that a couple going through marital counseling can overcome just about anything except contempt; that if you feel contempt toward your partner things are probably too far gone to fix. My own theory is that contempt comes not from a place of superiority as it may initially seem, but from a place of deep insecurity. Those who despise others and tear them down almost always are themselves very vulnerable and broken people. But they wear that mask of superiority, and every now and again we glimpse the contempt they feel for others, for the world, but perhaps at the deepest level for themselves.

So Jesus calls this Pharisee out. He's praying but the way he's praying has nothing at all to do with real prayer, because authentic prayer, like faith, is about love of God and neighbor. If we have no need of God (because we trust ourselves) and if we have no love for our neighbor because all we feel for him is contempt, then prayer is nothing more than a show. So the parable we heard today is meant, I think (as all parables are meant) to paint a picture that invites reflection. It's meant to provide us with a kind of window to see how the problem isn't just some first-century Pharisee's problem but a temptation all of

us must face. True prayer—of course, is about confession and humility and vulnerability—traits that are apparent in this parable in the tax collector—or as the older language of the sixteenth century put it, the “publican.”

Humility is a tricky one, especially for Christians. I’ve known (and perhaps you have, too) persons who know this story intellectually, even if it hasn’t really taken hold in their bones. So they develop a kind of “fake humility.” Clergy can be notoriously good at this. You compliment them, but instead of saying (as a normal person would) “thanks...that means a lot,” they say something like this: “well, it’s not me, it’s THE LORD working through me.” *Ugh!* Yes, of course it is. But sometimes people say it sounding a lot like a Pharisee; like “I’m supposed to be humble but really, isn’t it just wonderful how much the Lord so enjoys working through *me?!?*” (And why is it that they can’t acknowledge that maybe the way the Lord works through people *is* to make them particularly good at certain things, bestowing gifts for which the best response is gratitude, not false humility?)

In any case, the point is that of course Christians are all for humility; it’s just a tricky one to navigate because sometimes very arrogant people masquerade as humble. But if you spend some time with them, usually their faces will eventually give them away.

Here’s the thing though: this tax collector in Jesus’ story clearly isn’t faking it. He knows that he needs to put his whole trust in God. I wonder if the word vulnerability isn’t helpful here; not as a permanent substitute for humility, and not as a synonym but nevertheless as a way to re-think true Christian humility. Vulnerability is a lot harder to fake. Vulnerability is about knowing we really do need help: we need God and we need neighbors. What if Jesus is inviting us to allow our prayer to take us deeper into our own vulnerability?

This would take us back where we started: our trust, when rightly placed, is with God, because life is precarious. And the truth is: it really is beyond our control. Of course there are healthy and unhealthy choices, wise and foolish decisions we can make in our lives. Of course we sometimes have to lie in the beds we’ve made. But we are not masters of our own lives. We are servants. And sometimes the line between having it all together and having it all fall apart is a rather thin one. And I think that most of us, at a very deep level, know this. Some of us are better than others at juggling sixteen balls but the seventeenth reveals it’s all a trick, and whether it’s the third ball or the seventeenth or the twenty-seventh that finally brings everything crashing down, in the end we are exposed as “mere humans.” We are all in the same boat as vulnerable creatures of God; it’s just that the Pharisee is so busy “thanking God” that he isn’t like that guy that he misses the whole point.

*Gratitude. Persistence. Humility.* I think these will take us a long way toward developing a more mature approach to prayer, an approach that recognizes our complete and utter need for God’s mercy and God’s grace and God’s forgiveness—and above all, for God’s love. And as we recognize that need, we may well be able to see that our neighbor needs those very same things.