

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 23, 2022
Joel 2:23-32
Psalm 65
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Whose Prayers Are Answered?

Two people go to the temple to pray. One is a devout person held in high esteem by almost everyone. The other is a person collaborating with the occupying enemy of his own people.

Whose prayers are heard? Whose prayers are answered?

Today we're in the same chapter in Luke as last week, chapter 18. We start with the very next verse where we left off last Sunday, verse 9. It's another parable. And it's more of Jesus' teaching on prayer. It's also a teaching on generosity.

Once again, the writer of Luke has placed a narrative frame around this parable that steers our interpretations and thinking in a particular direction.

Throughout Luke's gospel we meet Pharisees who are either negative or ambivalent characters, and we meet tax collectors who turn out to be good guys. Matthew, for one; a tax collector who becomes a part of Jesus' core posse. Zacchaeus, for another; in fact, his story is coming up next Sunday.

So, in Luke, we're already set up to root for the tax collector and think badly of the Pharisee. Much worse than that, the history of the interpretation of this parable has been deeply antisemitic over the centuries. It has been used to condemn Judaism and the Jewish temple system outright and champion the tax collector as somehow representing an entirely new approach to salvation and righteousness. Yet Jesus himself was a Jew and participated in the temple system, and he himself never condemns either.

By now, in sermons on Jesus' parables, it's standard procedure for me to remind us all that parables are stories that invite us to hear and understand differently. A parable isn't an allegory or fable. Neither the Pharisee nor the tax collector in today's parable is a stand-in for any person or group. This is a story about two people, two men, two Jews.

Both of these Jewish men go to the temple to pray. If they're inside the temple complex praying in the court of the Jewish men, they are ritually pure; they are allowed to be there in the sacred precincts of the temple mount. It's a place we

expect people to go to pray, to seek forgiveness, restitution, wholeness.

We might not necessarily expect these two particular people to be praying in the temple, however. Pharisees were much more often found in the villages than in the city; the temple is the turf of the priests, not the Pharisees, who were lay people.

And tax collectors, well, they were collaborators with the Romans; they made their living collecting taxes from their own people and giving the money to the occupying enemy. This man is pretty brave to come to the temple given that he's pretty much viewed by everyone as a traitor.

Jesus' short stories, his parables, often pack a punch. Sometimes they are funny; other times bordering on tragic. Today's parable is the verbal equivalent of a cartoon. The images of both the Pharisee and the tax collector are caricatures. They are over the top on purpose. Neither is a description of a real-life person Jesus or anyone else encountered in the temple.

From the Pharisee's prayer, we understand that he is devout and observant. He is in fact ultra-devout and hyper-observant. He goes to great lengths in his religious practices; he does way more than is expected or necessary in keeping the Torah, the law of Moses. A first-century Jewish audience would understand that he really goes above and beyond, almost comically so.

From the tax collector's prayer, we understand that he is pleading for mercy. We don't know what he is thinking, only that he is seeking mercy from God. We don't know what he is feeling, only that recognizes and names that he is a sinner, that he falls short, that he is in need of divine aid.

So, what is the unsettling work done by this parable? Besides these caricatured portraits of two men praying, what would have surprised a first-century audience?

Part of the answer lies in a twist on the interpretive frame we have inherited from Luke and the way in which many biblical translations have rendered a particular sentence, a particular preposition, really. What sentence? This one, where Jesus says, *I tell you, this man went down to his home justified **alongside** the other... **because of** the other.*

It's a shocker for us because we have become accustomed to that preposition in that sentence being translated **rather than** the other, as in, the tax collector went home justified rather than the Pharisee.

The preposition in question is *para*. It has, in this parable, often been translated

rather than. It refers to the Pharisee. But in the majority of cases, *para* means alongside. We have it in English in words like *paradox*, *parallel*, *Paraclete*, *parable*. In the Greek tense used here it can also be translated *because of*. And since parables are supposed to open up new understandings and possibilities, this is probably the best translation.

Both the Pharisee and the tax collector went home justified. And perhaps, the tax collector went home justified at least in part because he benefited from the prayers of the Pharisee. This is a legitimate Jewish understanding of the work of prayer and of the life of faith as the work and life of communities not only of individuals.

This would have been a shocker for a first-century audience also. They would know that the God of Israel, the God of the temple was generous and that even a tax collector could be justified. But they might not have liked hearing it put so plainly.

If we are honest, we might not like it either. We know that this same God whom Jesus the Christ brought near in human form has shown us by his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension that God will come to us exactly where and as we are. We know that God's grace extends toward everyone. And yet, we sometimes think that some folks deserve grace more than others. But if everyone is invited, then everyone is invited.

This parable is about prayer. And it is about generosity, the generosity of God.

This prayer that we are in the midst of this morning, this common, meaning communal, prayer, is the liturgy of the Eucharist. It's a service of word and sacrament. *Liturgy* is an important word for us as Episcopalians and as Christians.

A common definition for *liturgy* is "the work of the people." And it is the work of the people, but it is something more. More precisely, *liturgy* means "public work at private expense." It is work undertaken by a group, the work of worship, that benefits people beyond those gathered. It costs us something to gather in person or via livestream to connect intentionally with God and God's people. It costs us something to review our lives, confess our sins, hear challenges as well as comfort from scripture, and pray for the world. Of course, it also brings us joy and peace and gives us a fresh infusion of grace. It brings grace to the world as well, to all those for whom we pray, including those who have no idea that we pray for them, that we pray on their behalf, that our prayers benefit them.

This amazing and gracious work of prayer that God does with us and in us and through us demonstrates what the prophet Joel anticipates in the first reading:

God's spirit will be poured out on everyone, regardless of gender or age or economic status, and everyone who calls upon the name of God shall be saved.

This amazing and gracious work of prayer empowers us to follow the model from the letter to Timothy in the second reading: we are able by God's grace and with God's help to finish the course. It's not about winning so much as completing. We can fight the good fight as it pertains to us, including as prayer warriors, giving our energy and effort to things that matter rather than squandering them on things that don't.

With all this in mind, let us pray again the collect for the day.

The Lord be with you.

Let us pray.

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.