

“Prayerful Humility”

Luke 18.9–14

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 24 Oct 2004

Jesus is at it again! He's doing his little number on the Pharisees, isn't he?! Not only is he casting the Pharisees in a bad light, he's doing it in the context of a parable.

As I remarked before, our word *parable* comes from two Greek words: *para* (beside) and the verb *balein* (to throw). So when you're listening to one of Jesus' parables, listen for the verbal judo, and listen for where it hits.

We have two main characters in this parable: the pious Pharisee and the earnest tax collector. In Jesus' day, it would not have been terribly unusual to see a religiously observant Pharisee (though maybe not doing a pious dialogue with God out in the open). But an *earnest* tax collector is an absurdity. In the time of this parable's telling, tax collectors were the toadies of the Herodian dynasty, who in turn were toadies of the Roman occupiers. The wrenched every last *denarius* out of the populace (97% of whom were living on the margin), and they took their cut off the top. So, to describe an “earnest tax collector” has an ironic ring, because we all know that there is no such person. (Just as Jesus' listeners would have thought that the only *good* Samaritan is a *dead* Samaritan.)

The Pharisee was doing what he was supposed to do, at least on the surface. He was praying fervently. He showed up at church every Sunday. In fact, he was a pillar of the church, who served on multiple boards and committees. *And he made darned sure that everyone knew it.* Are there parts of yourself that you can see in this character? I can see a bit of me there.

But what lies beneath his outward piety? Is there substance? Is he doing what he thinks is right, or is he just going through the motions to appear in good standing?

Let me read you a parallel story from the gospel according to Matthew, though he doesn't tell it in parabolic form: “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, *so that they may be seen by others.* Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”¹ The hypocrites in Matthew and the Pharisee in Luke are committing what is classically called the sin of pride. (It's not feeling good about yourself or someone else for their accomplishments.)

Now, I have to confess that I tend to think of some of the slick televangelists when I read this, and I want to judge them by saying, “Hey, dude, you're a Pharisee practicing a shallow acts of piety on the public airwaves.” In fact, the only time I remember seeing a televangelist who acted from a sense of humility was when Jimmy Swaggert apologized for his marital indiscretions. (That was more humiliation than humility.) But, I ought not rush to judgment, because there is plenty of the Pharisee in me that I need to amend.

I will assert, however, that the Pharisees in Jesus' day and the televangelists in our own give piety a bad name. When you think of piety, do you think of reverence for God and practicing your faith, or do you think, by inference, of *false* piety that is a show put on for the benefit of anyone who will watch? My surmise is that many of us hold the latter view, and I'll talk more about that in a few minutes.

Most mainline Protestants, especially we UCC folk, scrupulously avoid any act of public piety (shallow or otherwise). Here's a question for you to consider: How often when your out at a restaurant with family or friends do you stop and ask for God's blessing on the

¹ Mt 6.5-8

food? (I'll bet I know what some of you are thinking...)"That would be embarrassing! Religion is a private matter, not a public spectacle. It says it right there in the gospel: When you pray go into a closet and shut the door.") If you pray to be seen, then you might need to sequester yourself, but if you're praying because it's the right occasion, not just good form, then not only do I think that's alright, I think that's what the tax collector was doing.

I remember when I was supervising a colloquium group of first-year divinity students at Iliff, and one of them left the seminary under horrible family circumstances. I and the members of the group went down to Cherry Creek to buy him a gift as a reminder that we loved him. And we actually gathered in a small circle down on Second Avenue in Denver and prayed for God's blessing on him and the gift we were giving him. It's one of the few times I've literally practiced a religious observance on a street corner. But, we weren't doing it to be seen; we were doing it because we were all traveling back to home or school in different directions. But, it felt a bit awkward, but strangely right, to pray at that time in that place.

I think we take the privacy of our faith a step too far when we're afraid to talk about it with others. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be perceived like *them*. I want people to know that I'm an fairly enlightened, intelligent, progressive Protestant. When Jean and I were members of First Congregational UCC, they didn't have an Evangelism Committee, they had an "E-Word Task Force." Do you hear it? The embarrassment about faith? Not wanting to be associated with fundamentalists? Friends, just as John Shelby Spong writes about *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, so we must re-appropriate piety from fundamentalism.

Jesus doesn't say, "Don't be pious"; he says don't make a show of it. *Piety is the practice of religious faith and reverence for God*. And that's not such a bad thing.

We should not hide our lamp under a bushel – which we in the UCC have done. We have given over piety to a stereotype of Christianity perpetuated by others. And that's not a healthy development for progressive Protestantism.



What do you notice about the tax collector? He cannot even look up to heaven as he offers a heartfelt prayer, asking for God's mercy on him. Even when we are at our most vulnerable, we can approach God, who sees our hearts and minds, and ask for grace, forgiveness, and for mercy. The tax collector is humble and reverent in approaching God, and he seems to know who is ultimately in charge. The Pharisee, on the other hand, thinks that he is a better human being than "thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even the tax collector." And yet it is the humble tax collector who prays in earnest, who goes home justified – or in right relationship with God.

So, here is our \$64,000 question: How do we, as progressive Protestants, exercise a healthy, humble sense of piety, or being in relationship with God. One answer is by engaging a spiritual discipline. Now, I know that we're not particularly fond of the word "discipline" in our culture, so think of it as a *spiritual workout*, rather than a spiritual discipline, if that is helpful to you.

Here is a brief laundry list of activities you might choose:

- "Praying without ceasing," as Paul names it. Almost anything can be a form of prayer, if it is done with intention and attention. Walking, dreaming, working, playing – just about anything can be prayerful if you do it with the intention of it being a form of prayer and if you do that activity with your attention on God. (Lately, I've been swimming and praying at the same time!)

- If you need a little structure, try the centering prayer group that meets here in the sanctuary on Thursday mornings at 9:00.
- Walk the labyrinth over at St. Paul's on West Elizabeth Street. Walking the labyrinth is not a puzzle like a maze, but rather it is a very old form of prayer that is symbolic of a pilgrim's journey.
- Engage in Bible study. Our Kerygma class is starting soon on Thursday evenings.
- Be in touch with God on your own at least once a day. (There is no Islamic call to prayer six times a day, so you'll have to work out your own schedule.)

Having said all that, I should note that most of us who grew up in mainline churches or no church at all find prayer to be hard to get a handle on. So, here is a simple suggestion for a prayer, which I learned from Marcus Borg. (You can scribble this down if you wish.) "Lord Jesus Christ, You are the light of the world. Fill our minds with your peace, and our hearts with your love." And you can say this prayer in coordination with your breath. So, let's try it. Inhale on "Lord Jesus Christ." Exhale on "You are the light of the world." Inhale on "fill our minds with your peace." And exhale on "and our hearts with your love. So, I'd like to invite you into a relaxed attitude of prayer, and I'll say the prayer, so you can just breathe. And then we'll have a few moments of silence, and I'll bring us back with the word "amen." [inhale] "Lord Jesus Christ" [exhale] "You are the light of the world." [inhale] "Fill our minds with your peace." [exhale] "And our hearts with your love."

[time]

Amen.