

Pray Like a Tax Collector  
Oct. 24, 2010  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:  
Psalm 17:3-5  
Luke 18:9-14

Last Thursday morning, I walked out our back door and across the park to our neighbor, St. Martin's Episcopal Church. As a bagpiper stood at attention and played beneath a century-old oak tree, the family and friends of a long-time Charlotte banker and civic leader filed in for his memorial service.

With song and prayer, liturgy and scripture we remembered the life of this committed servant. At the end of the service, the pastor offered these words committing his soul to our creator:

Into thy hands, O merciful Savior, we commend thy servant Jim. Acknowledge we humbly beseech thee, a sheep of thine own fold, a lamb of thine own flock, a sinner of thine own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of thy mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.

Those are comforting words with power in how they evoke our confidence in God's open arms. But, we might say, must they include acknowledgment of this man as a sinner? Must we bring that up now, of all times, as his family grieves, literally moments before his ashes are placed in the columbarium? Is that really necessary?

Perhaps, on the other hand, there is no more poignant time to confess both our need for God's grace and the certainty of it in Christ. The two go hand in hand. That's why, when we confess our sins together in worship, we always hear the assurance of pardon. God gets the last word and that word is a "yes," not a "no." "Yes, I still love you. Yes, my arms are still open. Yes, I still want to be with you."

Nonetheless, confession – whether individual or corporate – doesn't come easy. Deep down, we know we fail God, each other and ourselves. But we'd rather not say it out loud. For more than a few people, a prayer of confession in worship is just a big bummer.

Worse, confession comes too easy, it's not sincere and it cheapens God's grace. Or, even worse, we can't see through our pride, however consciously or subconsciously, to even acknowledge that we are less than perfect.

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One day, Jesus found himself in the midst of that kind of folk, the kind that who give serious consideration to their conduct in the eyes of God and their neighbors and deem themselves exemplary. The Gospel of Luke describes them as "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." So Jesus told them a parable.

(Parables, says Professor Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "are like fishing lures: they are full of attractive features – feathers, bright colors – and they end with a sharp little barb!"<sup>1</sup>)

Jesus' story featured two characters. If this were a movie, both would be straight from central casting.

One was a Pharisee, a religious and spiritual leader among his fellow Jews, a devoted follower of God but one from the more liberal wing of those who read the Torah as scripture. Unlike the more conservative Essenes, Pharisees sought to invite all Jews into religious observance of the Torah.

This particular Pharisee wore the moniker "holier than thou" like a well-tailored suit. IF you look up "holier than thou" in the dictionary, his picture is in the margin. He prayed these words:

"God, I thank you that I am not like other people – thieves, rogues, adulterers and even this tax collector standing next to me. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of my income."

Scripture doesn't tell us how this man prayed, how he positioned himself, whether he raised his face to God or bowed his head. But he might as well have been looking in a mirror and liking what he saw. In his two-sentence prayer, he used the first person "I" four times. A person has to work pretty hard to make that many self references when they are supposed to be focusing on God.

As a Pharisee, he would have prayed the Psalms. It's easy to imagine that his favorite was Psalm 17, which includes the same frequency of self-references.

"As for what others do ... I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped."

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, commentary, p. 213

When we hear that kind of egotism and arrogance, we want to quickly reassure ourselves that we are different. But that is only to take a step further down the same slippery slope that the Pharisee was surfing.

Laura Sugg, a pastor in Virginia, says it this way:

How seductive it is to trust in ourselves that *we* are righteous and to regard others with contempt. *We* do *our* good duty and confess *our* sins each Sunday; we put *our* envelope in the plate or make that automatic payment online. *We* serve the church in *so many* ways. Hooray for us. Boo for those who do not follow the rules as *we* do – those whose work is detestable, who should not be allowed to sit in the same pew with *us*.” (Italics mine)<sup>2</sup>

That’s what we might say to ourselves as individuals. But it’s just as easy to do the same thing as a congregation. We are not like those other churches. We at Caldwell are an integrated church. We are open and affirming of a wide diversity of people. We strive to be missional and multicultural. We house a bilingual preschool and a homeless shelter.

It’s *not* that doing any of those things automatically makes us a prideful people. But, friends, it *is* in how doing those things may shape our self perception and our ideas of our standing before God.

The other character in Jesus’ story is a tax collector. Jesus knew how to use story to make his point. By picking the character of a tax collector, he knew his audience would immediately paint themselves a mental picture of a man despised by his neighbors. Tax collectors were rich. In collecting taxes for the Roman government, they took more than they were due. They squeezed the local citizenry and abused their power.

But when this tax collector began to pray, he hung his head. In [The Message](#), Eugene Peterson writes the Pharisee “posed” but not the tax collector. Peterson’s translation says he “slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up.”<sup>3</sup>

His prayer took seven words. He didn’t need any more. We don’t know what he’d done, how egregious his actions. We don’t need to. We do know that he modeled the kind of prayer that reaches God’s ears with a special urgency, a prayer of vulnerability and sincere humility.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 214

<sup>3</sup> p. 1441

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“I tell you, this man went down to his home justified.”

That’s how Christ concluded the story. The word “justified” means “made right” or “set free.” Something outside of the tax collector happened. Jesus didn’t say, “the man went home having made himself right” or “having set himself free because he said such a humble prayer.” Something outside of him occurred.

In the Reformed tradition of Christianity, we call this justification. “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”<sup>4</sup>

We might add a codicil to that this morning just to bring it home:

“Our salvation is a gift of God, not the result of works (even if we did open a homeless shelter and house a school for our Latino neighbors), so that no one may brag (and that includes disguising our bragging as confessing).”

We cannot save ourselves, even a little. We cannot meet God half-way. But Christ has closed that gap for us, not as a legal settlement but as a gift of grace. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth explains justification this way: “Jesus Christ is the man in whom God satisfies Himself in the face of our transgression and us in the face of our plight.”<sup>5</sup>

That gives a whole new meaning to the phrase, ‘Jesus is THE MAN,’ doesn’t it?

So how do we pray? More important, how do we understand the depth and breadth of God’s desire to be in communion with us? Barth writes our salvation in Christ, and nothing else, is “a redeeming event, as the fulfillment of God’s gracious will, as the reaffirmation of (God’s) right and ours, it can be conceived only in the form of a Yet and a Nevertheless,” which means we cannot get our minds around it entirely. It is, Barth says, an “impossible possibility,” at least in our limited human understanding.

So we might pray:

“Yet, I could never earn God’s grace. Nevertheless, God grants it.

Yet, however I try, I still stumble. Nevertheless, God picks me up and draws me near.

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:8

<sup>5</sup> Church Dogmatics, Volume IV, Part 1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation p. 19

Yet, my demons rage within me. Nevertheless, God gets the last word.

Yet, I can hardly contain my pride. Nevertheless, God listens for my prayer, however me-focused and not God-focused it might be.

My doing anything big enough or good enough to deserve God's love is yet an impossibility. Nevertheless, in Christ's resurrection, God is the God of possibility."

"And looking back once again," Barth writes, "it is the grace of God as mercy pure and simple, as a sheer Yet and Nevertheless"<sup>6</sup> that reveals how it stands between God and us.

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The Christian life is a paradox, something that seems as if it cannot be true, yet it is. Part of that paradox is the slippery slope of humility before God and each other. We should pray for humility, but remember it's only a half step from there to arrogance.

So, you might ask, should we walk through this world with our heads hung low in shame, acting guilty all the time? Is that what God wants? Is that what this parable is all about?

No, mind us all, the answer is not guilt. Jesus didn't say the man walked away with his shoulders permanently slumped. He hung his head to pray, but Jesus said he went home justified, made right, set free. Guilt is not the end of the story. Joy is. And joy, the joy of those who are forgiven, those who have been made right in Christ's death and resurrection, is the sum of our faith. I'm reminded of what the great preacher William Sloane Coffin asked:

"Why are we Christians so often joyless? It is, I think, because too often Christians have only enough religion to make themselves miserable. Guilt they know, but not forgiveness."<sup>7</sup>

"Christians," Coffin said, quoting Nietzsche "should look more redeemed."

So, when you pray, pray like a tax collector, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

But while you walk this earth, live with, in and through the joy of one who has been set free.

Amen

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 11

<sup>7</sup> Credo

