



(C-Pr 25: Luke 18.9-14), Bishop Allen K. Shin, Bishop Suffragan, October 23, 2016 at Trinity Episcopal Church, Ossining, NY

In last Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus admonished the disciples to "pray always and not lose heart" and ended with a question—"And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Today's Gospel story is in a way his answer to that question and he does it with a parable as he does. In this parable Jesus compares two characters of very different social backgrounds—a Pharisee and a tax collector—in their piety and prayer life.

In terms of the socio-economic class, the Pharisees belonged to what we might consider today as the middle class, which was a rather small class in the ancient times. The Pharisees were not allowed to take the priestly function in the temple. So, they found themselves in the role of teaching and preaching in the synagogues. This meant that they had to be diligent students of the Torah and thus were well educated. They traced their heritage back to Moses and adhered closely to the laws of both the written and the oral traditions. Their piety and spirituality centered in righteousness and orthodox formalism according to the Torah.

The Pharisee in today's parable was no exception as he fasted twice a week and tithed, i.e., gave ten percent of his income to the temple. What a novel idea by the way! He lived a righteous life according to the precepts of the Law. He had good reason to stand before God without shame. Why shouldn't he be thankful to God that he was not led astray to a sinful life like thieves, rogues, adulterers and even the tax collector? It seems like a reasonable and good thing to do. Wouldn't you thank God that your life hasn't turned out to be like thieves, rogues and adulterers?

Then we have a tax collector. The tax collectors belonged to a low social class, which comprised of the vast majority of the society in those days. Even though they were not economically poor, the tax collectors were lumped with the sinners and others of low social class.

They worked for the Roman authorities, collecting taxes from their own people. And it was generally suspected that many of them cheated and collected more than they should have in order to enrich themselves.

So, simply by profession alone, they were shunned and even despised by others in their community. The modern attitude toward them hasn't improved a whole lot either. Mark Twain,

for instance, once said, “What is the difference between a tax collector and a taxidermist? A taxidermist takes only the skin on your back.”

Given the remorse he has shown in today’s parable, the tax collector perhaps did cheat and collect more than he should have. So, he had good reason to feel guilty and to beat his chest and cry to God for mercy.

The Pharisee’s thanking God that he didn’t turn out to be like one of the sinners and the tax collector’s repenting his sinfulness in remorse, it seems that they are each praying in the manner they ought to. So, what is the issue?

Jesus ends the parable saying, “[The tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” But, if the Pharisee had good reason to be thankful to God for his righteous life, this judgment against him seems rather harsh. In fact, Jesus’ judgment in this parable is contrary to how the Law would judge the Pharisee and the tax collector. And that is precisely the paradoxical point of this parable.

To the Pharisee his justification before God is a logical extension of his righteousness according to the Torah; he deserves God’s justification according to the Law.

The disciplines of fasting and tithing ought to be spiritually enriching and edifying. But, his proud and self-gratifying prayer reveals a spiritually shallow and judgmental person. It is devoid of any sense of humility before God. The more he tries to make himself look better in comparison to others, the more insecure he becomes. He seems almost neurotic with the listing of sinners to turn God’s attention away from himself. Thomas Merton once said, “Humility is a virtue, not a neurosis.”

The Pharisee’s prayer fails to set him free from the bondage of legality. Rather, from his proud and judgmental pedestal, he fails to see his true self and the suffering of the others. Hiding behind the legal and moral precepts of the Law, his heart remains cold and his soul closed to the mystery of God’s mercy which is freely available even to the poor and the other sinners.

To the tax collector, God’s mercy is an urgent spiritual concern, for he recognizes his sinfulness. With his simple words, “God, be merciful to me a sinner,” this tax collector empties his troubled and anguished soul to God.

Jesus in his compassion enters into the suffering and pain of this repentant man. In his humble invocation of God’s mercy, the tax collector opens his heart to God for judgment. His soul becomes transparent in humility before God. He has one hope and one hope only for his justification, the hope in God’s mercy to forgive him. His prayer sets him free from the bondage of his sinfulness and from the bondage of the legal precepts. In his prayer his heart finds rest in the infinite love of God.

A seventh-century Syriac Church Father, Isaac of Nineveh, summed up the discipline of prayer life in these three things – repentance, purity and perfection: “What is repentance? Desisting former sins and feeling pain at them. What is purity? A heart which has compassion on every natural thing in creation. What is perfection? Profound humility.”

The tricky part of humility is that we should not be self-conscious of our own humility. The moment we are aware of our own humility, we are most likely no longer humble. Humility cannot be contrived or forced self-consciously. A genuine prayer of repentance, purity and perfect humility can neither be prescribed by law nor be contrived by sheer will. True prayer can only spring from the wellspring of true faith.

What state of faith will Jesus find in your heart and soul? Will Jesus find true faith in this parish? What would true faith look like in your prayer life? In the life of this parish community?

Today we are also celebrating the Confirmation of Warren. With this confirmation, we are also renewing our own Baptismal commitment and faith. This is the spiritual renewal of all of us here gathering today, the renewal of this parish community. I ask you to pray for the candidate and pray for your church. What would it look like for the church, the whole community, to pray like the tax-collector in today’s Gospel story?

Mother Cooper Conway told me about your leadership and participation in the winter shelter for the homeless. Because of your commitment to this project, more churches are actively involved in the shelter project. This is exactly a humble prayer in action in this two-parish community, Trinity and St. Paul’s together. I encourage you to go even further with your humble prayer and go to your neighbor and ask for their help so that you can be the church of God’s mission and vision.

Like the tax collector in the story, a prayer of perfect humility can only well up from the depth of the anguished soul which yearns with great urgency and honesty for God’s love and mercy. The humility to say, “Have mercy on me O Lord,” “Have mercy on us, O Lord,” just might lead you to a new life of grace. Such a soul will be exalted by God into his presence.

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”