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## Standing in the Need of Prayer

Luke 18:9-14

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 23, 2016 by the  
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The Pharisee and the tax collector. The churchman and the politician. The insider and the outsider, depending on the angle of your particular gaze. 'Us' versus 'them.' The Pharisee versus the tax collector. It's too easy, too regular, too normal, too status quo, to pit two people against each other, to create tensions and start divides. This is what gets high ratings in the media. It's too easy to do this because we love to fight in our society and in the church. We can bicker and take a bite out of the soul of one another over the color of carpets, over musical styles, over doctrinal issues like how Christ is present at communion or what happens at baptism, who can be ordained or not, political candidates and social issues. Some love a good fight. It's too easy to feed the monster of binaries--us against them, religious folk against the non-religious folk, Pharisees, the ones who pay tithes and support the salaries of ministers, who attend every church service of the week and more, against the 'nones,' the no-religious affiliation-never-want-an-affiliation-non-attending-Sunday-school-and-not-even-Christmas-eve-services-people.

I'm not taking sides this morning. I don't want to pit the Pharisees against the tax collectors. That's way too easy. It's too easy to create another squabble in a world that pays to watch Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) bloody bouts. I'm not interested in nurturing an adversarial spirit. There's enough of that going on. I want to sail in the love boat of God because as Irish writer and cleric Jonathan Swift said in 1711, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

I will not pit these two biblical characters against each other. Life and people are always more complex and beautiful than we make them seem. An anti-Semitic approach may paint the Pharisees in a bad light, which has been the case throughout church history. I've heard my whole life in the Church--"I don't want to be a Pharisee, I don't want to be a Pharisee, 'cause the Pharisees aren't fair you see, I don't want to be a Pharisee." But wait one minute. The Pharisees were not villains. They were faithful, pious, righteous, tithing, fasting, adherents of the law and this Pharisee goes above and beyond what the law requires; they endow spring break mission trips for students and pray over prayer requests from the community at midday prayer. The Pharisee's prayer is pretty standard in his day and a reworking of a common rabbinic prayer: "I thank thee that I am not..." In ancient ears, his words are not necessarily self-righteous boasting. On the other hand, the tax collectors are not superheroes. They are employees of a foreign government collecting taxes, participating in a corrupt political system, considered traitors and religiously unclean. With ancient eyes, they are the bad guys but with our eyes, they may be seen as the exemplars over against the religious Pharisees. But it's not that simple.

I don't want to make them square off against each other and have us pick sides in another religious conflict; we don't need another religious crusade. Another religious battle would only baptize the

current political climate. But what if there was another way? What if we asked, “What do the Pharisee and tax collector have in common? Where is the common ground?”

I find it interesting that this text shows up in the lectionary at this hour in the nation, a little more than two weeks away from the presidential election. From what I’ve observed during this national political race and overall political climate in this state, as a nation, as Americans, we are standing in the need of prayer and need to pray. This text is very timely. Whether it is the strong believing Pharisee or a slick political figure of the government, both pray and this is undeniable; they might not like each other or believe the same thing or have the same background but they pray and hold this in common. They go up to the temple to pray, maybe for different reasons or with different tones but the fact is they both saw the significance of prayer and they pray. As we see the state of our nation, we might want to pray the title of that book, “Bless this mess!” But even more that, the prayer of poet and Anglican priest John Donne may be what we need in this hour: “O Lord, never suffer us to think that we can stand by ourselves, and not need thee.”

As the Church, rather than joining in the bickering, we ought to be praying. We ought to find ourselves in the house of worship like today, praying as the election nears. We ought to pray just as much as we protest and pinpoint out the flaws of each candidate. Of course, prayer, as with any spiritual practice, can be manipulated and function as a mini-sermon or news briefing. It can make public statements to the listening audience and may not always be fully directed to God. Take this prayer from Spanish Saint Teresa of Avila for example: “From silly devotions and from sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us.” Despite the ways our prayers may sometimes be directed at each other and be feeble, the actions of the Pharisee and the tax collector, call us to prayer. Luke, the gospel writer, focuses on prayer throughout this gospel, especially noting that Jesus prays in many different situations (3:21; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28,29; 11:1; 11:5-8; 18:1-8; 18:9-14). If we should be anything as a university chapel, it is a house of prayer. If we can’t be praying as Christians, I might as well be texting WTH are we doing? Prayer is, as Christian pastor George Buttrick once noted, “friendship [with God] held in reverence.” To maintain a friendship, one stays in communication. And one should never be too busy to pray, especially, if we take the sage advice of Reformer Martin Luther who said, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”

The Pharisee and the tax collector both pray. This is not to say that their prayers are identical because they’re not. They are different because they are two different people from two different walks of life. Their lives and experiences have been different. On one side, the Pharisee prays, “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.” To our ears it sounds a bit arrogant and maybe he’s trusting himself too much, but he’s praying, trying to be faithful to what he knows in his tradition. He uses more words than the tax collector and the pronoun “I” several times making it sound as if he’s promoting his pedigree and campaigning for President—“I’m not this, I do this.” We are told that he’s “standing by himself,” which means that he “prayed about himself” or “prayed with himself” or “prayed to himself.” Really no matter how you slice it, the Pharisee isn’t painted in such a positive light.

The tax collector, however, we are told was “standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast” when he prayed. Totally different optics or posture of prayer. This governmental officer was mourning and praying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He was an outsider to the

religious tradition, but prayed in such a way that he revealed he knew God. It's odd but it's true—sometimes the best Christians are those who don't even call themselves 'Christian.' We can learn from the other, those on the fringe of our lives or traditions. The ancient Eastern prayer of the heart, dating back to the early sixth century, called the 'Jesus Prayer' whose classical form is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" is basically the tax collector's prayer.

The Pharisee and tax collector's prayers are different and it's the sinner who seemingly commands God without saying 'Please' and it's the Pharisee who says, "thank you" so it's not always cut and dry. The Pharisee in some ways is an affirmation of mystic Meister Eckhart's words, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." So I can't bless this historic binary of the Pharisee and tax collector; it's not that simple. But despite their variations, there is one other common theme between them and this is where they also find common ground—God. Each of their prayers begin with "God." Even if you don't know what or how to pray, perhaps all you have to say is "God." God. "Dear God, be good to me. The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small" (Fisherman's Prayer). Dear God. God is the starting point whether for the hyper-religious or faithful or the corrupt tax collector. There's something about the wideness of God's mercy implied in this. Their prayer tones and overall content differ, but they both start with God. They may think of God differently and believe God acts differently through prayer or in the world. But both point us to the idea that the starting place in the spiritual life is God.

If we don't begin there, it will be a quick ending for us all. If we don't begin with the One who was in the beginning, who is the alpha and omega, there will be no life created in and through us. I wonder if we have forgotten God in the midst of this tense, sometimes ridiculous, reality-TV show-like-political election season. We call candidates all kinds of names at times but have we been calling the name of Jesus? These two men in the temple remind us that God is the subject of prayer, ideally, and if God is absent we might as well just be talking to ourselves because in authentic prayer God is the subject.

There is common ground between the Pharisee and the tax collector, two figures whom on the surface don't have a lot in common but they both pray and turn to God. The turn itself is a conversion for that is what conversion is—a turning. This is all surprising as two very different people from distinct walks of life both turn to God in the same location. Literally, they stand on common ground as they stand on the ground of the temple. We can find common ground, if that is what we are looking for. If you never search for it, you'll probably never find it. But I must also say that just because you name God in prayer doesn't mean you get to control God. "God is so high you can't get over Him; so wide you can't get around Him; so low you can't get under Him." What that spiritual is trying to say is that God is untamable thus both of these individuals in the temple have in common the experience of being surprised by God through a redemptive reversal. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." God does what God foreshadowed in Mary's *Magnificat*—bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly. To hear that the tax collector was the one who went home justified and not the Pharisee would have been shocking to the ancient listener; it was the overturning of the expectations of people of faith. But that's the point—God will not be bound by our paradigms but God will flip the script on you to get your attention about who really is the Subject of the Christian life, about who really is God. And it's not you nor me nor the Pharisee nor the tax collector.

This is something we all have in common. God will surprise us when we think we fully understand the way Jesus works. If the Pharisee is the good guy and the tax collector the bad guy or vice versa, we've missed it altogether if we think God's mercy is predicated on who we are or what we do. The justification or the salvation that comes is not "because of" who the Pharisee is or "because of" what the tax collector prays. It's offered "In spite of" the rich religiosity and accomplishments of the Pharisee and "in spite of" the corruption of the tax collector. God's mercy comes "in spite of." Neither receive what they deserve. It's all reversed for redemption. If salvation was based on a lifestyle or the kind of prayer, then there would be no need of God's grace and mercy. Receiving mercy is not based on what we possess or what we lack but based on the mercy of God. It's not about either this or either that. It's about God.

So we have to be careful of trusting in ourselves, so self-assured that we have everything right, because just when you think that is the case, God will perform the redemption reversal and exalt the humble. Right after Jesus says this, people brought infants to him so that he might touch them but the disciples ordered them not to do it. Jesus, however, says, "Let the children [those with no social status at all] come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." The kingdom belongs to children, children who may pray such innocent prayers as, "Dear God, I am sorry I was late for Sunday School but I couldn't find my underwear." Jesus not only redeems the least of these, like the children, but this is an attempt to redeem our Christian imagination to what is possible when God is at work in the world. God's reversals happen to all of us, not just the Pharisee and tax collector. And this uncontrollable movement of God is a call to prayer, to check ourselves before we wreck ourselves spiritually.

God will not be controlled by humans or human standards. God didn't reward the Pharisees' piety nor did God condemn the tax collector, all of which we might assume would happen. New Testament scholar Eduard Schweizer puts it this way: "The parable sets us free from the notion of achievement, which revolves about what we have accomplished, and from that of incompetence which evolves about a lack of self-esteem, from the enthusiasm of success and the resignation of failure." This is why I refuse to take sides this morning and endorse a religious UFC match between the Pharisee and tax collector. As one commentator notes, "Anytime you draw a line between who's "in" and who's "out," this parable asserts, you will find God on the other side" (David Lose). This is common for all of us on the Way. God alone is the judge of human hearts, as *the* Subject of the Christian life. That means nothing is impossible, including mind-blowing reversals.

In Jewish folklore, there was a rabbi who was at the point of death, so the Jewish community proclaimed a day of fasting in the town in order to induce the Heavenly Judge to commute the sentence of death. On that very day, when the entire congregation was gathered in the synagogue for penance and prayer, the town drunkard went to the village tavern for some schnapps. When another Jew saw him do this he rebuked him, saying, "Don't you know this is a fast-day and you're not allowed to drink? Why, everybody's at the synagogue praying for the rabbi!"

So the drunkard went to the synagogue and prayed, "Dear God! Please restore our rabbi to good health so that I can have my schnapps!" The rabbi eventually recovered, and it was considered a miracle. He explained it in the following way: "May God preserve our village drunkard until he is a hundred and

twenty years! Know that his prayer was heard by God when yours were not. He put his whole heart and soul into his prayer!" [Nathan Ausubel]

This is a reversal of expectations which means that it's possible that we get it wrong at times and that when we think we have God figured out, God overturns our expectations. Just as the disciples get it wrong in their mistreatment of children, we too will get it wrong at times, so it won't be the schnapps-loving folks or dishonest politicians needing prayer, it will be us. It will be me (with the log in my own eye). I will be the one in need of mercy, whether I think I'm too good or not good enough. I will be the one, not 'them' over there, for all of us depend on the mercy of God.

Just when we might want to go ballistic about the presidential candidates or the candidates in the NC gubernatorial race, the implicit call to pray in this parable leads us back to our fundamental need of God's mercy. God desires us to ask for mercy, as those who often fall short with things done or left undone. It's prayer time and we may pray the tax collector's prayer or the Jesus prayer or even these words:

*It's me, it's me, O Lord,*

*standing in the need of prayer.*

*It's me, it's me, O Lord,*

*standing in the need of prayer.*

*Not my mother or my father {brother, sister, Trump, Clinton},*

*but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer....*

Now let us pray.