

When We Go up to Pray?

Christ Lutheran Church
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
October 24, 2010

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18: Luke 18:9-14

Two men went up to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. So, with which one do you identify? Not a comfortable choice! Actually, neither the O.T. nor the Gospel lesson is very comfortable. How can this tax collector get off so easily and the Pharisee come out so poorly? Now **when we go up to pray**, who are we? It is easy to read the NT and see the Pharisees as a bunch of hypocrites, but that is not the whole story.

When I was in graduate school, I wrote what I then thought was the definitive paper on the Pharisees. You see, they were absolutely the most faithful of the Jewish religious people. Probably Jesus and his family were of the party and Paul was a most devout Pharisee. There were numbers of types of Pharisees. They kept the law, and they were faithful in attendance at the temple. They wanted to do everything correctly. Some had a scribe to follow them around all day and at the evening they would have him take out his note pad and they would ask: "What have I done that I should not have done, and what have I not done that I should have done?" Then they would make amends accordingly. Does that not sound like one of our general confessions? Then there was the bleeding nose Pharisee. He was so afraid of looking on a woman with lust that he kept his head down and was always running into walls and bloodying his nose. They were at worship every Sabbath. They made a pledge and paid it on time. Actually, they tithed everything. I concluded the paper with the statement: "Today's modern equivalent would be the church member that was in church twice on Sunday and never missed Wednesday night

prayer meeting.” Now this was a Baptist seminary and that statement did not go over too well!

We look at the Pharisees and think of them as hypocrites, but they were the religious best. They were a little liberal theologically, but ultra conservative politically. The Sadducees were the opposite. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, but would not be caught dead in the gymnasium with Greek kids. The Sadducees had not been affected by the Babylonian captivity and the influence of Persia, but were strict followers of Moses. No modernist doctrine of resurrection, but they saw nothing wrong with the gymnasium.

The tax collector was a scoundrel. He worked for the hated enemy power: that is Rome. He cheated, collected more than was owed and pocketed the extra.

What a shock to the audience when the Pharisee came off poorly and the tax collector went home justified. So what is the problem?

Look first at the lesson from the prophet Jeremiah. The text is made up of the liturgical confession for worship. The words are the congregation at prayer. They are struggling with God and life. They confess their sin, but then start lamenting about God’s lack of action on their part. They are God’s own people, so why is God acting like a stranger? Why are the crops doing so poorly? Why are they losing the battles with the enemy? Sound familiar? Why are these wars and the terrorism we are fighting never ending? Why is the economy in the doldrums? Why, why Lord? God is silent! And when God answers, it is not the expected. These are a wayward people and I will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.

Look at Paul’s farewell address to Timothy. “I have fought the good fight, I have run the race and there is a crown laid up for me.” How is this different from the boasting of the Pharisee? How

many times I have had parishioners request that passage be read at their funeral?

How are we supposed to assess our work? What do we say about ministries that we do that we know are good and right? At first glance, these are not very comfortable lessons.

Christ Lutheran does a lot of good things. We are open to all and accepting of others. We have ministries of compassion and care. We pray for people in parishes that are different from us. How tempting to say, “God I thank you we are not like those other churches. Narrow minded, exclusive, judgmental.”

Let’s look again at our readings. The Pharisee stood apart from others and prayed to himself. He was **self**-righteous. He was good, but that is not the point. Where is God in all of this? The tax collector had not a leg to stand on and he knew it. He throws himself on the mercy of God. We heard last week about the judge who did not fear God or humans but to get that woman off his case, he granted her petition. But **God responds out of love and compassion, not out of compulsion.** This is not some mild parable of arrogance verses humility. It is a parable about God! Our God is the one who justifies us, not on the basis of our deeds or the lack of them, but as a gift of grace. God alone is judge of the human heart and works to justify all people.

The Pharisee separates himself from the rest of God’s creation. When we divide up people: those in and those out, those others, we have stepped into this Pharisee’s shoes. Here is the clue, when we separate ourselves from any part of this family, from the body of Christ, we contradict the Lord whom we love and serve.

When Paul complains about being abandoned by so many of his co-workers, it is God who stands by him, who sustains him and he knows that it is grace that enables him to do the work to which he

has been called. (Not I, but Christ in me, is his motto.) Keeping faith is a gift of grace. “A Brief Statement of Faith” in the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* begins: “In life and in death, we belong to God.” We are the baptized and God is faithful to us in prison, in hospital, at home and in the work we are called to do.

The Israelites, who are praying as recorded by Jeremiah, finally get it right. They have tried to lay a guilt trip on God—God, are you going to abandon your own people? Where is your sense of right? But finally they get it right: “We set our hope on you. You are the one who does all these things.” That is our stance. **It is in God that we hope.** Every task to which we are called individually and as a church is to be done as best we can, but all of our doings are gifts of grace. They are not our justification. It is God who justifies. We are to be instruments of God’s Grace. Our divine mission is to be instruments of reconciliation. The Pharisee was not a bad person, he just trusted in himself. The tax collector, stripped bare of deeds, relies totally on God to redeem him.

Our hope is in God, who made the heavens and the earth. Our works are gifts of grace poured out before the altar as libation for the world. We come to this table knowing that just as this bread that we break is Christ’s body for us, **we are to be the Body of Christ for the world**, but it is God’s doing and it is marvelous. Our growth comes from affirming our oneness with God and God’s creation. So, **when we go up to pray**, remember it is about God and not about us, and we will return to our homes in mercy, grace and gratitude. Amen

W. D. Lackey