

Justified
October 23, 2022
Luke 18:9-14

This is the second of Jesus' parables on prayer in this section of Luke's gospel. It comes right after the one we heard last week, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

In that parable, Jesus, the Master Teacher, instructed his disciples on the necessity of persistent prayer, to not lose heart. He assured them that God heard their prayers and would act for justice on behalf of the oppressed. And Ken, towards the end of the sermon, made this observation: that God will sometimes step back so we can step in.

"Persistence," Ken Kovacs, Oct. 16, 2022

Today's parable in a few short sentences, also offers challenge and insight into understanding ourselves, into our relationship with God and relationship with one another. Jesus, whose self-proclaimed mission to save not the righteous, but sinners, illustrates through two characters, the complexities and simplicities of honesty, compassion, mercy and grace.

Let's take a look at the text. The very first sentence says whom Jesus is speaking to: to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt. The story plays out with each person, first a Pharisee and then a Tax Collector, presenting themselves intimately to God in the holiest place possible, in the Temple. Each of them speaks from a place of deep longing. They want to be in a right relationship with God – justified. It's a word from legal language that means "acquitted", "or shown to be in the right," "freeing someone from their guilt." I like to think of it as balanced scales. Both are trusting God to hear their prayers. But the nature of the prayers differ.

Many Christians have been conditioned to see the Pharisee as a negative character, but Jews listening to Jesus would have assumed that the Pharisee is a righteous man. Pharisees were highly respected among most Jews and would have been seen as highly scrupulous, very attentive, in their efforts to obey God. The Pharisee in this parable even goes *beyond* all requirements of the Law: he *exceeds* the requirements of both fasting and tithing.¹ These are indeed, excellent qualities. Surely, this man can stand uprightly before God.

The tax collector, on the other hand, really is on the opposite end of the spectrum. Let's try this analogy: if the Pharisee is an upright church leader, an elder, the tax collector, shall we say, steals from the offering plate. Tax collectors were viewed quite negatively. They were notorious for dishonesty in their collection of taxes, having purchased the right to collect taxes for their region from the Roman authorities.

We must try to imagine, then, how surprising and stunning it must have been for Jesus' hearers at the end of the parable when they heard that it was the tax collector – a known sinner! – who was justified, made right. He came before God for mercy ... and received it (!) while the other

did not. The Pharisee who showed disdain for those others perceived as less worthy, less deserving, did not go down from the Temple justified.

Such a small story, yet how many questions it opens up about ourselves and the nature of God.

This parable, among many things, invites us to think how one approaches God. It challenges us to have gain insight into our attitudes, and also to acknowledge our very real human limitations and failings.

Here's some questions one might raise:

When I come before God, do I seek to justify myself? Do I feel it is necessary to keep adding weight to the balance? Do I look down upon others, see them without mercy or compassion? Am I assuming that God's mercy is limited, that God will need to choose them or me? Are my own anxieties about who I am, my own worthiness... are these keeping me from knowing God's love and mercy? And does this keep me then, from going out and showing love and mercy to others?

Yes, the text opens up a lot of questions:

Do I make it all about myself and despise those others whom God loves?

Am I so worried that God will not love me, that I do not make room for God?

I suspect that Luke's congregation had to wrestle with these questions. If you read further on in the text, the very next section shows Jesus' disciples once again judging others and attempting to limit God's grace. As people bring their infants to Jesus so he can bless them, it is the disciples who the text says, "sternly order them not to do it." (Luke 18:15)

Do we make our prayers – our lives -- all about ourselves and despise others whom God loves? Are we so worried that God will not love us, that we do not make room for God?

As in the previous parable, the widow and the unjust judge, Jesus ultimately invites us to see and know the nature of God that shines its light underneath and throughout this story. The tax collector does not justify himself. He knows himself to be entirely dependent on God's grace and mercy -- this profound and infinite and limitless love that justifies us all. It shifts our attention to God, "the God who delights in justifying the ungodly, welcoming the outcast, and healing all who are in need."²

There are many ways to explore this in our own lives, in our own relationship with God. We can ask questions about our own prayers, private and corporate. What are our expectations for prayers? How do we pray? To what kind of God are we praying?

Do we make room for God to act, to transform our lives? Do we make space to receive God's mercy? Does our prayer lead us to compassion and grace?

Each week in worship, we pray together a Prayer of Confession. You might want to take a look at it on the front page of the bulletin. First of all, note where it is in our Order of Worship.

Going back a little bit, we begin our worship with God's invitation to come into God's presence, -- the Call to Worship. Then we sing together of God's goodness and faithfulness. For we know it is God who calls us, welcomes us, invites us and we are filled with joy and expectation.

And then, note that even before our Prayer of Confession, we are called with the words that God knows us and cares for us and longs to show us mercy. The words in today's service are:

*"Even before we admit our sin, God promises to hear us with mercy.
Trusting in God's faithfulness.... we pray together."*

Then in our unison prayer, we bring our faults and our failings before God and one another.

I have met several people over the years who do not like having a prayer of confession in worship, by the way. Some churches I've been in didn't use it at all. "I don't need to pray like that," some said. "I didn't do that." "I don't need that." It's a way, I think, of justifying themselves... of not stepping back, of not making room for God to work in their lives.

Hmmm. Can you imagine if we were to pray instead:

God, we were very good this week.
We didn't cheat on our taxes. I paid my pledge to the church.
I set out my recycling on the proper day, and even took the bin in on time.
I'm so much better than the person sitting in the next pew.
They really make a lot of mistakes. And have you heard about their family?
There.... but for your grace, O God... go I.
Thank you God for this time together.
See you next week. Amen.

Instead.... Let's look at our prayer of confession and see what we pray for... and about.. and why:

*We confess that we have sinned..
We have wandered..
Turned toward idols (as John Calvin was quick to remind us, we continually make other things greater than God, believing that they will make us whole)
We have lived without compassion,
Disregarded the well-being of your creation...*

In it, through it, we honestly acknowledge who we are. We ask for mercy, knowing that it is only in God that our lives are truly healed. We pray for guidance and that we will be led in God's ways.

And did you notice that always, always, always...

Our confession is followed by an Assurance of Pardon/ Declaration of Forgiveness.

See what it says in today's bulletin:

In the name of the One who yearns... YEARNNS!!

To give righteousness, to justify, to make things right between God and us and all creation...

God raises us up... evens the balance.

Our sins are forgiven.

What do we do in response to such goodness? We stand and sing together in praise and thanksgiving to the One who knows us and loves us and accepts us and forgives us and who calls forth mercy and love and grace from God's people. Can one hear that enough? That we are completely and unconditionally accepted and loved.

We do this every week.

We step back so God can step in. There's space to experience the love we receive from God. There's space to grow, to change; space to learn how to forgive our neighbor, to see others and ourselves with eyes of compassion. "To live without self-justification is extraordinarily freeing."

I believe that Jesus looks on us, his disciples, with great compassion, knowing that we are afraid and anxious. In our fear, we seek to justify ourselves to ourselves, to others, to God because we are not trusting of how deep and wide God's mercy truly is. We are afraid to see our own selves as we truly are. Yet, God's radical acceptance of God's creation – of us – is beyond our imagining. Rather than know God's grace – we fear God's judgement and in turn, harshly, mercilessly judge and condemn others.

The tax collector, despite...or perhaps because of his sin, shows great courage... great faith. In acknowledging who he is, where he has fallen short, he steps back so God can step in. He dares to ask God for mercy...for love...for truly amazing grace.

We don't know the end of this story, do we?

What happens next for both of these people?

I invite *you* to imagine it:

What did the Pharisee do next? Did anything change spiritually, emotionally?

Did this encounter make a difference in his life?

What about the Tax Collector? What happened next?

Week after week we gather to pray, trusting in the goodness and faithfulness of God. And then we go out into God's world seeking to love even more fully, open our hearts and hands with greater generosity and kindness, we leave energized and inspired to seek and work for justice because we have experienced this first from our loving Lord.

We don't need to spend our energy and resources working so hard to make God love us.

In a short while, we are going to be celebrating the Sacrament of Baptism, one of the two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church.

Here we will see a visible sign of an invisible grace.

Here we see through act of the pouring of water, the passing through the waters from death to life, here we are washed clean from sin, we're filled with Holy Spirit, we affirm that we are claimed by a loving God.

We are invited to know and affirm our baptism day after day after day.

God has already made you right, made you whole, set you free of the fear that you are not good enough or worthy enough to be fully known and loved.

That's one of the most profound and loveliest things about baptizing infants: this child does not have to work to earn God's love --- it is freely given, joyfully shared.

It's not what we do that defines us --- it's who *God* is – the one who names us and claims us.

Friends..... you are set free. Justified. Set right.

So let us us go and live and love and serve as beloved children of God.

¹ "Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus, Klyne R. Snodgrath, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2018, p. 467, 471

² The Pharisee, the Tax Collector, and the Reformation. Oct. 21, 2013. Dear Working Preacher, David Lose