Humility in Prayer, Luke 18:9-14

Can anyone tell me what they thought today’s Gospel reading was about?...........Okay, if anyone thought it was about prayer you are exactly right.

As people of Christ, prayer is an important part of our faith journey. Last Sunday you heard Rev. Ann speak about “The Way of Love,” which was the topic of our convention last weekend. We received an invitation from our Presiding Bishop to Practice the Way of Love to assist us in achieving a Jesus –Centered Life. Rev Ann showed the handout of a cross with seven points to show the “Way.” Prayer is one of those seven points. I’m sure in the ensuing weeks you will hear more about the Jesus Movement and the Way of Love.

Today’s parable starts with two men going to the temple to pray; a Pharisee and a tax collector. In Jesus’ time it was quite normal for those desiring to be faithful in their journey with God to go to the temple to pray. A person could pray privately at any time and corporate prayer was observed three times daily. We don’t know if the men were there for corporate prayer or if they just happened to be there at the same time.

As you heard, these two men were extremely different in their approach to prayer. We are all aware there is more than one way to pray: We can pray silently or aloud, standing or kneeling, lying prostate on our faces or sitting. We can pray anywhere or at any time…..God is everywhere……There is no place on earth where we are not in God’s presence. God is available at any time to commune with us or to listen to us. Whatever is said to God should come from the heart and as natural as we talk to our best friend…….The difference between these two men is not about their positioning or the words they spoke but what their position and words said about what was in their hearts and their attitude toward God and other humans.

Jesus told this parable “to some who trusted in themselves” and thought they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. This was the attitude of the Pharisee, however, it should not be assumed his actions represented all Pharisee’s, and the same is also true about the tax collector.

Have you ever thought you were better than other people? You should know better, because Christians prove by their words and deeds they are the same as everyone else, the difference being they should always attempt to show Christ’s love and admit they are sinners and ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness…… This is the point of today’s gospel text………….

This reminds me of a short story….A man went to see a psychiatrist. “Doc I’ve got two problems.” The psychiatrist said “tell me all about it.” The man began, “well, first of all I think I’m a Coca-Cola machine.” The psychiatrist sat the man down and started therapy. Weeks went by and the psychiatrist gave it his best shot, but nothing seemed to working. Finally out of exasperation the psychiatrist jumped to his feet, took two quarters out of his pocket, shoved them in the man’s mouth, grabbed him by the ears and shook him until he swallowed the quarters. He then shouted, “okay, now give me a coke.”

The man then said, “I can’t Doc. That’s my second problem, I’m out of order.”

The only people God can help are those who admit they have a problem. They have to admit they are “out of order.” They have to admit they have a problem, admit what the problem is, seek help to overcome it and persist until the problem is resolved.

Arrogance is the opposite of true self-image and self-respect and it is the direct opposite of the two great commandments, to love God and love our neighbor. Humility is a realistic evaluation of who we are in God’s eyes……… Linking with who we are in God’s eyes is the start and an important part of our spiritual journey. The remainder of the journey involves staying in touch with our creator and who we can become with God’s help.

The Pharisee represented the best in religious society. His life echoed his care for religious things. Pharisees were self-righteous lay people and religious leaders who were dedicated to religious observances and admired by other people of their faith. This Pharisee thought he was better than everyone else and he attempted to justify himself in the eyes of God; two big mistakes. These are the same mistakes most of us have experienced at one time or another, me included. We use everything we can to justify ourselves; where we went to school, our intelligence, where we live, sports, family, job, and the list goes on and on. We feel the need to prove ourselves to God, but it isn’t necessary as long as we come to God in faith and humility just like the tax collector.

The main issue in today’s text is the sin of self-righteousness, the belief in salvation by works instead of trusting in God’s grace. The Pharisee believed his good works could get him into heaven, but the tax collector had the humility to do what God required. He faced the truth about himself and asked God for mercy and forgiveness. We can’t gain God’s favor through good works alone. We must humbly repent and confess our guilt……Humility raises us to the kingdom. Jesus sees the truth about people by looking into their hearts. He saw the Pharisee was not sincere and he knew the tax collector was. Anyone who sees themselves as they truly are, and repents, will be redeemed by God.

Jesus wants lives which have been transformed. He wants followers who love others like he loves us. He wants followers who will feed the hungry, care for the sick, and clothe the naked.

Religion is not the same as Christianity. Religion concentrates on worshipping God by following man made rules. Christianity concentrates on worshipping God in sincere faith and loving others. There are five basic rules which can move us from religion to Christianity.

1. Refuse to bind ourselves with man-made rules.
2. Reject a person’s appearance as a spiritual yardstick.
3. Review your journey with God.
4. Return to self-examination and confess your sins.
5. Remain humble

Remember, your relationship with God and what is in your heart is what matters.

Jewish Law required the faithful to tithe and fast at least one day per year. The Pharisee gave more than 10% and fasted two days per week. He was a religious over achiever who stood off by himself and looked at other worshippers with contempt. In modern day language he might have been saying; “I’m thankful God that I am not like them, It’s hard to be humble when I’m perfect in every way.” The tax collector was justified by accepting God in faith and poured his heart out to ask forgiveness. The Pharisee’s prayer was self-centered……..The tax collector’s prayer was God centered. He did not compare himself to others. He made no reference to what he did or did not do. He knew God was aware of what was in his heart. Jesus loves sinners because they know they still have room to grow and depend on God. Jesus also loves sinners because they don’t look down on others. We are all the same in God’s eyes.

This man, the sinner, went home justified,……But as believers are we surprised? We know God accepts the humble and the needy…..We also know God accepts, forgives, and saves sinners by grace through faith. We know because God has accepted, forgiven, and saved us……In the words of John Newton in 1779:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.