

Why Did We Come to Church? II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 Luke 18:9-14

Two people go up to the temple to pray; one a Pharisee, the other a sinner. Is Luke giving us the parameters of the church? From one end of the religious spectrum to the other, we gather to pray. The Pharisee and the sinner appear as opposites but there they are in the temple together. Well, here we are in church, and I want to ask you to focus on why we are actually here.

First the details of the story: One of the people praying is a Pharisee. He is the most irritating man in the world. He is the raised volume of a car ad on television, the obnoxious football fan, the pious, absolutely certain of every truth Christian, the person who thinks all his opinions form like golden truth in every mind, the person who knows he is simply superior and you can always tell when he fakes humility. **Golda Meironce** said to a foreign diplomat, "Don't be so humble, you are not that great." What a tragedy to trying on wings for induction into the angel society when in reality he's an old warthog from hell.

Yet even this man has some good points. Let's take up for the Pharisee before condemning him. The Pharisee showed up at the Temple. He prays. This man knows his Scripture. Paul, the apostle, was a Pharisee, in his pre-Christian life. Listen to him: "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law **blameless.**"

And get this: He tithes. We can't be too hard on a man who tithes. We are in a recession, after all. One more thing: He fasts. Christians, by and large, are not big on fasting. If some doctor wrote a diet book and recommended fasting as a way of reducing stress and weight fasting would become a fad. In Christian circles, fasting doesn't stand a chance against dinners on the ground, pot luck suppers, church bar-b-ques, bake sales, and prayers breakfasts. Jews and Muslims fast; why don't we? Give this praying, tithing, fasting Pharisee a little love.

Now take a second look. The Pharisee represents what is dangerous for all of us. After all the stream of goodness can be polluted. Goodness can turn to ugliness. The sense of superiority, self-praise, and self-congratulation can easily take over. "I am not like those people. I am better than them." Have you ever said, "At least I'm not as bad as a thief, a liar, or a murderer"? How far down the wickedness chart do you have to go in order to honestly say, "At least I'm not as bad as"?

The prayer of the Pharisee certainly begins well: "God, I thank you." If he would have said the AMEN right then, it would have been an acceptable prayer to God, a prayer of thanksgiving, but the Pharisee was only getting warmed up for the main event: a self-

praising speech. **Luke Timothy Johnson** suggests that the Pharisee prayed to himself rather than to God; or, he prayed “with reference to himself” but with an eye on the tax-agent!”

Isn't it disconcerting to have someone not look at you when you are talking to him? Reading the newspaper, watching a ballgame, just not paying attention. Well, God needs our attention. We need to look at God when we pray and not at those we feel are less than we are.

No one actually prays like this, but we are capable of this attitude. A **Flannery O'Connor** character, Mrs. Turpin, offers a more contemporary version of the Pharisee's prayer: “**If it's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!' It could have been different. Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!**”

So if we avoid actually praying like the Pharisee, in what ways do our attitudes and actions betray us? Benedictine sister called **Joan Chittister**, says, “I learned that to be properly wicked it was not necessary to break the law—**just to keep it to the letter.**” Biblical literalism has created a hard-nosed, combative church. A sense of righteous superiority. Elitist.

But what of the other man praying there in the back of the temple? A tax collector, standing far off, humbles himself before God, looks at the ground, beats his chest, and prays. Hear him pleading for mercy. When was the last time we asked God for mercy? Seriously, we can get so wrapped up in our church-going, that we forget why we have come in the first place. We have come to ask for mercy, to confess our sins, to ask for help, and to be made right in the sight of God.

We are here for the prayers. Listen to God. “The still small voice” in a cacophony of human incompetence and ignorance. “Thus says the Lord” in a suffering land. Talk to God. In our praying we say thanks to God. Praise. Confess. No wonder the ancient liturgy begins with “**Let us give God our thanks and praise.**” No wonder the tax collector ripped out, “**Have mercy on me a sinner.**” It was a cry from the depth of his soul.

That's why we pray together. For Luke, prayer is action. Not an optional exercise in piety, carried out to demonstrate one's relationship to God. Prayer **is** that relationship with God. The way we pray therefore reveals that relationship. Are our prayers filled with a deep, intimate love of God? Are they songs of praise and adoration? Are they at times white-knuckled cries of despair? We are in church, God's house. Don't leave without listening and speaking to God.

We are here for the community. Look at Luke's description of where the two characters are spatially located: The Pharisee, “standing by himself,” and the tax collector, “standing far off” are in the same predicament. They are in church, but they

are alone. They represent what can and does happen in church. People are in a group and yet they feel alone.

As the Beatles put it, **Look at all the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?** Face reality: people feel ignored and left out at church. No one speaks to them. No one notices them. Is there anything sadder than being alone in a group that says they value fellowship, friendship, relationship. Listen, we do not come to church to be alone with our thoughts or our prayers. It took me a long time to realize that the Christian faith is not the triumph of the individual over evil or even the solitary accomplishment of good, but rather a community of shared hopes and experiences, frustrations and failures. There is no such thing as a private Christian, no such thing as a personal faith in the sense of its belonging to me and no one else. It's not about coming to church and having a personal experience; it's about being – being the body of Christ, being the community of faith, being the family of God, being a congregation of priests, being. Psychiatrist **Erich Fromm** made much of the difference between a consumerist culture of having and possessing and a culture of being. He says, "If I am what I have and if I lose what I have who then am I? What about our culture? A materialistic, consumer society prefers having to being. In America, we rent about 2 billion square feet of storage space. Hoarders?"

It is so hard to be in community. I sense that Jesus instructed his disciples to have communion every time they gathered because there is community building power in shared bread and wine. What if holy communion is a sacrament against the anti-community tendency of a sinful world? **"The gifts of God for the people of God."**

The church needs the Pharisee and the publican. We are all sinners, some deeply religious sinners, others deeply worldly sinners – but sinners one and all. And practicing faith together, sometimes successfully, other times in utter failure, creates community. As the American philosopher Yogi Berra says, **"In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But in practice, there is."**

Most of all, **we are here for the justification** that we can't earn on our own. Instead of self-justification, we receive the justification that is in Jesus. Pharisee and tax collector, you and me, all alike, we are eligible for justification. If we have gotten sideways, out of sorts, if we have missed the mark, lost our way, with a prayer of confession and a cry for mercy, we start anew. Jesus puts us "rightwise" with the Father.

Fred Craddock says that he visited a church cemetery. One family had a long row of graves, all perfectly aligned except one. Right at the end, one grave, was "catty wampus" from the others. Fred asked folks at the church what that meant. A member of that family said, "That's one of my relatives. He lived his life sideways, catty wampus to everything and everyone. So we thought it was only honest to bury him the way he lived."

Well, I am here to tell you that Jesus makes us right wise by the way he lived. All of us sideways, catty wampus, strange people, can go home justified in the eyes of God. And it begins with "God have mercy on me a sinner!" And that's not a bad place to start, if you ask me. Amen.