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**"Come away by yourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile!..." Mark 6:31
Are you ready to accept the invitation?**

Pharisees, Publicans, and Prayer

A Reflection on Luke 18:9-14

Jesus often spins his stories in such a way that require reflection and thoughtful prayer, especially by those of us who are not students of the first-century Jewish milieu in which he lived and preached. Not this time.

In this parable, Jesus has given us two stark caricatures of people at prayer. So at first glance, there is an obvious, and sensible message. But what if we go deeper into the nature of what these two represent?

First, however, a more basic question: Why do we pray? Oftentimes, it seems that in prayer we are presenting to God what we have arrived at as the solution to our problem or the fulfillment of our need (thereby thoughtfully sparing God the burden of examining the issue any further), asking that God simply bring about the desired end. And if that does not come about soon, we repeat the process, as many times as we think necessary, so as to change God's mind, to talk God into what we have already determined is best. Or we may attempt to barter with God – "You do this for me and I'll do that for you!" – as though we are God's equal.

Of course, we do not have to cajole or bribe God into doing what is best for us, as if God would ever do anything less than that. Nor do we have to change God's mind, or talk God into doing the right thing. Let us hope that we have moved beyond that primitive image of God revealed in such passages as Exodus 32:11-14, in which Moses is trying to convince God to be merciful and not to destroy the newly-freed Israelites. In the words of the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, "Prayer does not change God, but it changes [the one] who prays." A twentieth-century biblical scholar put it even more directly: If no change occurs as a result of prayer, then one has not really prayed. This forces the question: When I pray, whom am I trying to change?

Back to the two characters of Jesus' story: The Pharisee is a member of the most exalted caste of first-century Judaism – exalted because these people knew the Law, and followed

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it rigorously. And what is meant here by “the Law” are not simply the Ten Commandments, but rather the 613 regulations that comprise the complete Law of Moses, or Torah. Few people of that era were literate; and so few would even know that body of laws, much less be able to follow them. This placed the Pharisees in a position of being able (and, apparently, quite willing) to judge such lesser, sinful beings. And that, precisely, was his great sin: his judgment of the tax collector.

Despite what certain vocal commentators would have you believe, Jesus gives very few direct commands. One of those he does give is, “Do not judge” (Matthew 7:1); judgment is God’s work, not ours. But in this story, the Pharisee is taking the place of God in his judgment of the Publican – and, unlike God, the Pharisee’s judgment contains no mercy.

The tax collector then was probably not loved any more than tax collectors are in our time. He was an agent of the Roman occupiers, collecting taxes in their name and with their authority, and supporting himself on whatever he was able to finagle out of his fellow citizens over and above what the Romans exacted from them. To the Jewish people, tax collectors were cheats, thieves and traitors. And yet to Jesus, this tax collector was an honest man – honest, at least, about himself: “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (interestingly enough, the very word chosen by Pope Francis to identify himself in his recent magazine interview).

It can be easily seen that the words “human,” “humus,” and “humble” are related in their origins. They are also related in their meaning. The humble person is not one who thinks him- or herself to be dirt that can be walked on by others. Such is a pseudo-humility. Rather, the person of true humility is one who assesses his or her strengths and weaknesses, accomplishments and failures, virtue and sin, and acknowledges them all with honesty. Humility is the virtue of honest self-assessment. It is also related to the virtue of humor, especially humor toward oneself. This is found in one of the “hidden Beatitudes”: “Blessed are those who can laugh at themselves, for they will never cease to be amused.”

In this parable, Jesus asks us to pray in such a way that we come before God in honesty and openness, willing to be changed so that we might become ever more the person God has created us to be, trusting that God’s only desire is to love us into becoming that person. That is enough of an ideal for any of us to strive for.