

Glancing Sideways During the Prayer

Luke 18:9-14

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Please pray with me:

Merciful God,

*May this story find its place
in our hearts and in our minds,
so that through its words,
we might come to know our need
for your mercy even more.
Through Christ, our Lord, amen.*

Do you remember this one?

The Baptist pastor, Bruce McIver was preparing to baptize seventy-seven year-old, Cecil. So, one Sunday, they filled baptistry, and just before the service Bruce met with Cecil to talk through the details and do a “dry run.”

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Bruce said. “There’s a metal bar like a towel bar on the baptistry floor. When you’re in the water, I’ll guide you until your feet are under that bar. That will keep your feet from slipping out from under you.”

Cecil nodded that he understood.

“Now Cecil,” he continued, “when you’re in the water, cross your hands high on your chest – just under your chin. I’ll put my hand on top of your hands. I’ll put my other hand firmly at the back of your neck. Okay?”

Cecil again nodded his understanding.

“When I lean you back, don’t resist. Just bend you knees slightly and let me lay you straight back into the water. Your feet are anchored under the bar and when you come back flat on your back like that your body’s buoyancy will keep you afloat. I’ll simply put you under the water – only a couple of inches – and I promise that I’ll pull you back up before you can swallow any water.”

Cecil smiled with confidence and they went through the dry run with no problems at all.

Well, the worship service began, and Bruce moved Cecil down the steps and into the water. Cecil was obviously nervous as he waded into the center of the baptismal pool. Bruce whispered in his ear, “Everything’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

Cecil cut his eye toward Bruce and began to mutter, “Huh? ...Eh? ...Huh?” It was at about the third “Huh?” that Bruce realized that Cecil had taken his hearing aids out and couldn’t understand a word he was saying.

“Dear friends,” Bruce began loudly, “this is Cecil. He made the beautiful decision recently be baptized.” The packed house nodded in affirmation.

“Because of your faith and your commitment to following the ways of Jesus, I now baptize you, my brother, in the name of the Father and the Son... and...” And at that moment, Cecil jumped the gun. He bent his knees and, instead of going back flat, angled slightly to the right, rolled back, and he sank.

Bruce says, “I managed to go under with him far enough to keep my hands in place, one on the back of his neck and other on the front of his neck. But this only added to the problem because my hold, carefully designed to guide him, was now choking him!

His own two hands were now flailing around wildly and we thrashed around like two alligators before I managed to pull him up. He surfaced, spat out a mouthful of water, coughed, and then smiled weakly at me and whispered loudly in my ear, ‘Thank you.’”

Bruce says, “I still wonder if he thanked me for baptizing him or for saving his life?”
(*Stories I Couldn't Tell While I Was a Pastor*, 53-54).

There’s something that’s not just humorous, but haunting about the image of the high, holy clergy person choking the broken sinner down into baptism. It doesn’t feel that different than the image of a self-righteous Pharisee glancing sideways during his prayer and saying, “God, I thank you that I’m not like him... that I’m not like her...”

Two guys walk into a church.

One of these guys is a really good man. He gives a lot of help to the poor, gives a tenth of his income to the church. He prays. And he tries to live and do what is really right. And now, inside the church, he’s thanking God that he’s able to live such a life.

The other guy, on the other hand, is a bad man. He runs a predatory business that has led to bankruptcies and to losses of jobs and homes. Now he sits in back of the church, saying, “God have mercy on me, a sinner...”

And when the service is over, and the two are walking out the door with everybody else, we learn that God has justified the *bad* one, and has not done so for the good.

Jesus sets the story up like a “Which one?” story — as if to say, “There are two types of people in this world. Which one are *you*?”

He uses different terms, of course: “A Pharisee and a tax collector went up to the temple to pray...” The New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, paraphrases it like this: “It’s like saying, ‘A Pope and a pimp went up to St. Peter’s to pray...’”

So, what really was a *Pharisee*?

We picture them as self-righteous, sanctimonious connivers. But, historically, that’s not really fair. Some of them did think Jesus was a fraud – that he probably thought too much of himself, that he was impure and too critical of authority, too popular.

But, in fact – and this is even in the New Testament – many of the Pharisees respected Jesus, admired him, and some, in the end, even became his followers. And during this time, during Roman oppression, it was the Pharisees who gave so much to keeping the fires of faith alive in Israel. Most of them weren’t rich, but did give generously. And in a culture that was increasingly corrupt and greedy and immoral, these men kept God’s law.

These were the kind of people who hold a church together. We could stand to have a lot more people with their kind of commitments.

And who is the *tax collector*?

Well, he’s a man who sells out his neighbors. He’s a collaborator with the conquering, occupying empire. He takes money from his own people to support the invaders from Rome, and he overcharges his neighbors to line his own pockets. He is a traitor and a parasite.

Imagine for a second that you are a Ukrainian, and the Russians did annex your country. And now you are being taxed by the Russian government to continue to fund your oppression. And now imagine that one of your fellow Ukrainians who you know volunteers to collect the taxes for the Russian government.

What do you think of him? It’s not all that unlike how a tax collector was perceived in that time and place. And yet – *and yet* – this one leaves the service justified by God.

Is that fair?

Let’s think for a moment of that Pharisee. Is it fair that God rejects him? Is it bad to be thankful for our strengths, for our blessings? Why not be thankful that while other people have lost their way, have fallen on hard times we have somehow been spared from that?

Only that’s *not* what he does. He doesn’t thank God that he’s not a thief or an adulterer or a tax collector. He gives thanks that he is not *like* them. “Thank you that I am not *like* people who commit adultery or who take what doesn’t belong to them or that I am not like this tax collector.”

Do you see the difference? I hope you do.

He has stopped praying and gone to looking sideways during the prayer. His eyes are cut to the side to measure another person's life against his own. He's not looking at his own life at all.

But the tax collector, on the contrary, at least has his gaze in the right direction. Jesus says, "He would not even look up." He is looking at his life, lamenting what he sees, and pleading his need.

And this judgmental Pharisee doesn't even seem to notice that this man is in torment, and pleading for God's mercy. And that's how it so often happens with us, too, isn't it? We look down on people whose lives and whose hearts we don't fully know.

If ever, while driving to church on a Sunday morning, you have even once spotted a worn-down and weary homeless person, who appeared strung out on drugs or wrestling with mental illness, and you said under your breath, "What a hard life that must be; I'm thankful I don't live like that," — then you have prayed the Pharisee's prayer, too.

After all, is there really a difference between a Pharisee who looks at a tax collector and says, "Thank God I'm not like him," and a Christian who looks at an addict and says, "Thank God I'm not like him"?

You see, each of us has prayed the Pharisees' prayer a thousand times in our lives. He is us, and we are him.

This is not to say that there are not some truly terrible people in the world, whose actions we ought to condemn. It is to say that even in this, we could have some humility and some self-awareness of our own failures. You can't have any integrity if where your eyes are fixed most are on other people's failures without any consideration of your own.

If we are too afraid to face and to name our own contradictions, then of course there is no other place to look than at somebody else and say, "Well, at least I'm not like that." This is cheap and lazy and it's cowardly.

"The problem is them," we say, then walk right past the mirror that would show us that the problem is *me*. The real problem is *me*.

The old gospel song comes to mind: "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. *Not* my brother or my sister, *not* my father or my mother. It's *me* in need of prayer."

The reality is that when we won't face the shadows in ourselves, when we let our sins go *un-confronted* and *unconfessed*, our lives remain *unhealed*. And the truth is that the world will never find healing until there is a greater humility in it.

Are we waiting for somebody else to begin it? Whatever else is true, we are the only ones who can take responsibility for our own part and ask for mercy.

Clarence Jordan was a baptist preacher who, in the 1950s, founded an interracial farm in rural Georgia called Koinonia Farms. Because of their public witness to racial equality, Clarence and his wife were kicked out of the church they were members of in town.

The following week, a deacon came to visit Clarence and said this:

"Clarence, I've been unable to sleep since the church voted you out. Every time I get close to sleep, I hear singing."

"What singing do hear?"

"I hear, 'Were you there when the crucified my Lord?' And, Clarence, when I cast my vote to kick you and Florence out, I was there. And I've come to ask for forgiveness. Will you forgive me Clarence?"

"Yes, I forgive you."

Then the man asked, "Clarence, will you go to the Lord and ask Jesus to forgive me?"

Clarence said, "No. I can't do that. When you wanted my forgiveness, you came directly to me and asked me. If you want Jesus' forgiveness, you ask him. I can't go to God on your behalf to ask for your forgiveness. But I'll tell you what I will do – when you go, I'll go with you."

The two men went into the backyard, underneath the pecan tree and knelt down, and Clarence went to the Lord with him in prayer. He later told Florence, "I've never seen a grown man cry so in prayer."

Is it possible that some of us need nothing so much as to weep and to ask for our own forgiveness?

The good news is that when we go down to such a prayer, we find someone with us there. Christ still comes to kneel beside every life that confesses its need. And in those who rise up from such asking, Christ rises in them.

Here's how the parable ends.

When the Pharisee has finished glancing sideways at others to measure his life against to feel better about himself, not another word is said about him in the rest of the parable – as if to say nothing about such a life can matter much.

But Jesus says of the one who asked for mercy, that having been justified by God, he went *home*.

“God, have mercy on *me*.” That is a way to think and to pray and to live that really can take us toward *home*.

*“When I fall on my knees,
with my face to the rising sun,
O, Lord have mercy on me.”*

Amen.