

20 Pentecost C

Jeremiah 14:7-10- 19-22

Psalms 84:1-7

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

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Grace and peace to you from Jesus who loves us.

Jesus continues teaching about prayer today in Luke's gospel. Last week it was the persistent widow changing the mind of a judge and today an example of two fictional characters with very different approaches to prayer.

What is helpful here is that Jesus uses the example of these two men as polar opposites. It helps us to see and understand just what he is getting at. I can go on at length to describe the taste of an apple, and even help you understand by giving you a sample. But you'll know a lot more if you get to taste both an apple and an orange.

Part of learning about faith is also learning what it isn't. In our confirmation class this last week we walked through the rite of Affirmation of Baptism. It might be a long time since your baptism or since you've seen one, but in that rite, there is a part where we say 3 "yeses" and 3 "nos." Luther thought it was important that we realize both what we are saying no to when we make a faith commitment, as well as, what we are saying yes to. So, 3 times we say "no" to all things not God, saying "I renounce them." And then 3 times we say yes to God as God, Son and Spirit.

So here we learn both what prayer is and what it isn't. Prayer is not a means of listing to God our accomplishments no matter how grand or numerous. The Pharisee saw himself as a pretty good person and perhaps he was. Certainly, he could check off the boxes of tithing and fasting – principles of Judaism in the day. But Jesus points out that his heart just wasn't in the right place. The good that he was able to do became something that separated him from others. Rather than using his abilities in works of justice, or for the benefit of all, he allowed them to fuel his own ego.

The tax collector on the other hand seems to have preferred that no one saw him in his desperation; not surprising. Tax collectors were a favorite target of social distain in the day. Easily picked on, joked about at the dinner table or in the pub, they had come to represent the lowest of societies occupations – the job no one wanted but someone had to do. He knows his social standing and that no one would understand his prayer. His is a private moment with God, he doesn't care who sees, because he's not in it to show off anyway.

I am reminded of a Sunday here, some time ago, when a man came and joined us in worship. HE was new among us. Some of you may remember him. He was obviously distressed as he sat listening to the songs and prayers. And when he came forward for communion, he was weeping. He stayed at the rail and we let him be for some time, but he didn't want to move from the communion rail. Eventually I knelt down in front of him in quiet conversation, asked his name and held his hand. Communion continued and still I stayed with him, right here. Soon enough communion was over and still I stayed with him, listening to his despair. It was one of those moments when to ask him to make an appointment wasn't going to help. Communion was over for some time - it felt like a long time that I stayed with him there, but I knew I wasn't alone with him in that moment. I could sense the whole congregation that day in prayer and concern, your hearts reaching out to him. Your thoughts supporting me. After a while, the ushers came forward and helped him to sit down again, but there was no rush. I was so proud of us, of you. You made space for that time of need for a stranger and it was beautiful. That day I believe we lived a life of faith and prayer together as Jesus would hope. I'd love to insert a story like this into Luke's Gospel or send an email into the past to say "we get it!" "we understand!" "we're trying!" We might not always get it right, but we know it when we do.

Sometimes I know people wonder about the names we pray for on Sundays too. Some names are there for a long time and we may have no idea who they are or why their name is there week after week. This is however an important ministry – and a pretty easy one. Think about, pray over those names during the week; this is the work God invites us into. I know one time someone had been on the prayer list for a *long* time and we asked them if we could take their name off. But then they explained what it meant to them and how our prayers had made a difference. We have kept their name on as they continue in their diagnosis. We do review those names often, but anyone may ask to be on the list. We all go through difficult times.

Prayer is one of the ways we are changed. When we engage in new practices and continue with them, over time we are actually changed by it. When we want to learn a new behavior or work ourselves out of an unhelpful one, sometimes we just have to do a new thing enough times until it creates a new normal.

As we pray over and over for justice, for our hearts to be opened, for people to have enough to eat, for those who grieve – we begin to be reshaped ourselves. Our hearts begin to learn that we cannot hold judgment and compassion at the same time. We cannot or continue to abuse the environment while we plant trees. We cannot welcome all if we're not paying attention to how we unknowingly put up barriers. It's true most times we are on a path of learning and not aiming for perfection, yet our inner disposition is reflective of our outer actions – and we can pray our way into such integrity.

As we learned last week – prayer can happen in many ways too. It doesn't always fit whatever stereotype we'd like to fit it into. Perhaps you would like to try a new prayer practice or pick up a traditional one that is new to you.

You could restore praying at the dinner table, before bed, in the morning. Pray for the names we list each Sunday. Pray for your loved ones or estranged ones.

Or try prayers that are unconventional such as a doodle journal, singing a prayer, pray on the train or bus as you see the lives of others, pray in the grocery store, or as you exercise. The way you pray isn't important, but allow it to move you and to align your heart with God's intent. If you are changed by it, so will be the world around you. Amen.