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Praying With the Stars VI. Help!

Luke 18:9-14 (NRSV) 9 He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The shortest - but perhaps the most poignant – verse in the New Testament is when Jesus discovers that his closest friend Lazarus has died before Jesus is able to get to him. The gospel of John records this simple, succinct sentence: “*Jesus wept.*” Now, there are times when the gift of language needs to be used at length, for what we are attempting to discuss or describe needs nuance, elaboration, extended discourse. But sometimes that is **not** the case, and what we need, what is evoked in us, is a simple, powerful, succinct declaration. And just as John’s two words describing Jesus’ reaction to Lazarus’ death is all-the-more powerful precisely for its brevity, sometimes the sentence that we have all said at one time or another is also complete in its compactness, powerful in its pithiness. That sentence is actually one word: “**Help!**” Help. Who among us hasn’t said that at times. We’ve said it in a lighthearted way, but we’ve also said it, hopefully not *too* many times in our lives, when things were just utterly and completely bleak. Have you had those times? Has that sentence, that

powerful word escaped your lips? I suspect so.

That's the essence of the tax collector's prayer in our scripture this morning, one of Jesus' parables about prayer, and our latest example of notable prayers in the Bible for this sermon series that I have called "Praying with the Stars." Help. Help. And as I move into these last three sermons of this series, I want to make liberal use of the wonderful writer Anne Lamott's newest book in which she talks about there being three "essential prayers." What are those prayers, according to her? **Help, thanks, and wow!** Those are topics that will guide these last three sermons in this series, and today's topic is indeed "Help" and that parable that Jesus told of the two very different prayers there in the Temple so long ago seems a very apt way into the topic of "Help!" For listen to that tax collector again: *"...the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"* Where does such a prayer come from? Well Lamott says, that plaintive plea of that tax collector – and, sometimes, of you and me – begins like this:

It begins with stopping in our tracks, or with our backs against the wall, or when we are going under the waves, or when we are just so sick and tired of being psychically sick and tired that we surrender, or at least we finally stop running away and at long last walk or lurch or crawl toward something. Or maybe, miraculously, we just release our grip slightly.¹

"We just release our grip slightly." Twelve-step groups call it "hitting bottom." But it doesn't necessarily have to be so; sometimes it's simply the realization of one's utter

¹Lamott, Anne (2012-11-13). Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers (p. 5). Riverhead Hardcover. Kindle Edition.

powerlessness in some situation and the admitting of the fact – which we are all so loathe to do – that events are not under our control. Again, listen to how Lamott describes that point at which we find ourselves willing or able to loosen our grip:

Most good, honest prayers remind me that I am not in charge, that I cannot fix anything, and that I open myself to being helped by something, some force, some friends, some something. These prayers say, “Dear Some Something, I don’t know what I’m doing. I can’t see where I’m going. I’m getting more lost, more afraid, more clenched. Help.”²

The beginning of what she calls “good, honest pray[ing]” indeed begins when you and I acknowledge that we are not in control and that we indeed need help.

I don’t know about you, but I hate that! I want to be self-sufficient, always cool, always in-charge, always able to manfully face any storm. In that, I am like the first person in Jesus’ parable – the one who gets labeled by Luke as the “Pharisee.” Now, before we go further, I have to point out something crucial. The way the word “Pharisee” is used here is not something we want to uncritically follow. Why? Well, two important reasons: we actually **know** that describing the “Pharisees” of Jesus’ day in the way that the gospel writers did when writing fifty or sixty years later is simply **historically inaccurate**. For in point of fact, the *real* Pharisees of Jesus’ day were among the most dedicated, most moral, most Godly Jews there were. They were not “legalists” (as later tradition too often completely unfairly painted them) but were actually very close in their understanding of God’s love and grace to the things Jesus

²Ibid. p.35

taught and embodied. But secondly, and much more importantly, to uncritically continue to make use of the word “Pharisee” as synonymous with judgmental, arrogant legalism is to unwittingly play into the kind of thinking that dehumanized the Jewish people and helped lead to the horrors of persecutions, pogroms, and even genocide. And we don’t want to do that; the gracious God of the Jewish people whom we Christians are grafted onto weeps when we demonize, however unwittingly but nonetheless surely, the people whom God chose and loved and continues to love.

So, in order to not play into that sad tradition, instead of naming that first character in the story a “Pharisee,” I’m going to call him “Pastor Prig” – because **this** pastor realizes that there are times when he can be just as snooty, arrogant, and high-horse as the one praying that first prayer that Luke tells us about. So, with that re-write in mind, let’s look at that first prayer: *Pastor Prig, “standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’”* Now, our translation this morning of this parable actually obscures the real problem in this prayer, for the most literal translation of his words would in fact be this: ““The [man]... prayed to **himself**.”³ That line makes me wince. For I have done that. I have ostensibly prayed to God but really was talking to myself. I have allegedly asked God for more wisdom but really was congratulating myself for how smart I was. I have found that my prayers were really a boast about my own humility – and bragging about how humble one is reminds me of that famous but fictitious book “Humility And How I Achieved It,” or about the perhaps apochryphal “CEO who prided

³<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/Oct2598.html>

himself on being a devout person and who would pray, 'O Lord, use me, especially in an advisory capacity.'"⁴

There's also another problem in this approach to prayer, and, again, I wince a little because I know that I have done this too: his prayer defines himself by berating other people. Or, as one preacher puts it, "*he did not focus on his own worth and strengths, but on the deficiencies of others. His value rose only as he devalued those around him.*" And, moreover, "*In his disdain for those he considered unworthy, he had become a kind of spiritual bully,*" forgetting that his "*relationship with God has nothing to do with how terrible other people are.*"⁵ So, not only is this prayer or Pastor Prig self-centered and self-congratulatory, it is in fact a misuse of prayer - for God will not love you more if you can convince Him to love some other folks less; grace is not a zero-sum game where for you to "win" someone else has to "lose"!

So where do we go at this point? If life indeed sometimes drives us to the realization that we are not in control, not in charge, if we would honestly escape the trap of using our prayers to berate and bash others, if we truly do want to come before God with transparency and humility as that word "Help!" escapes from our lips – then where do we go? Well, the first thing to note is that it is in those moments that we are the most teachable – painful as what we may have to learn can be. For it is in those "Help!" moments that our defenses are down, that we can acknowledge how we may have helped create the mess we're in, that we can admit that our old ways of dealing with

⁴Cf. http://day1.org/604-a_satisfactory_humility

⁵<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/Oct2598.html>

things, old patterns, old ways of being in relationships just aren't working and we need – help! Lamott puts it like this, in her own unique style: *“Sometimes... we cry out in the deepest desperation, ‘God help me.’ This is a great prayer, as we are then at our absolutely most degraded and isolated, which means we are nice and juicy with the consequences of our best thinking and are thus... teachable.”*⁶

What can we be taught in such moments by God? How do we know that our prayer of “Help!” is both heard and responded to? Well, let's be clear on what the response will **not** be: it will likely not be God doing exactly what we request for God may well have other ideas about how to best respond with the highest possibility for us than we do. That's why another writer can remind us that *“Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine,”* for *“[p]eople who are in the habit of praying... know that when a prayer is answered, it is never in a way that you expect.”*⁷ Moreover, the response to that plea of “Help!” will always be full of grace, but it will not be magic. God is the One whose attempts to love us never, ever give up, but God must also work within a messy, complex, sometimes very ornery creation. But that also gives our clue about how to tell that God is seeking to answer your prayer. Again, let me share how Lamott puts it:

Have you become more generous, which is the ultimate healing? Or more patient, which is a close second? Did your world become bigger and... more

⁶Lamott, pp. 3-4.

⁷Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 60. Cited at <http://www.centraldenver.com/blog/2010/09/21/i-have-learned-that-prayer-is-not-asking-for-what-you-think-you-want-but-asking-to-be-changed-in-ways-you-can%E2%80%99t-imagine/>

tender? Have you become ever so slightly kinder to yourself? This is how you tell.⁸

This is how you tell – that God is incessantly at work in you to offer love in new ways in response to your plea. And, as Lamott suggests, the results may not be dramatic, but subtle, and over time. Because you and I are at our most teachable when we cry out that plaintive prayer, God will indeed seek to teach us - but teaching takes time. But over time, indeed, we can find ourselves becoming more generous, finding more good in people, responding with more kindness to ourselves and others, more and more inclined to want to assume the best of people rather than the worst, more and more able and willing to share one's love with others. All of those things ARE responses to our plea of 'Help!'

In one of the most memorable lines of Lamott's book, she says this about how love can indeed flow from even the worst of those "Help!" moments:

I have seen many people survive unsurvivable losses, and seen them experience happiness again. How is this possible? Love flowed to them from their closest people, and from their community, surrounded them, sat with them, held them, fed them, swept their floors.⁹

And so, so, so much more. Did that increase of love shown to them "fix" the problem for which they had prayed "Help!?" Not necessarily. The reality of life is that some situations can't be "fixed." But they can be transcended and transformed, they can be

⁸Lamott, p. 21.

⁹Lamott, p. 23.

learned from, they can be an opportunity for love to be shown, for you and I to be more loving to those who are hurting, and for you and I to be more willing to be loved when we are hurting, less prone to the prideful presumption that we are the ones who give not the ones who receive love.

This week, then, I invite you to join me in the following: Think about those times when you have said “Help!” and then think about how the response to that prayer has been surprising evidences of love that you did not expect. And then think about those people in your lives whose lips may be forming that word “Help!” right now, and ask God to let you be a vehicle of the divine love to reach and respond to them. Finally, give thanks, give thanks, that at the heart of creation is indeed a “love that will not let [you] go,” that wants to help, and does help in ways both wondrous and unexpected.