



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, Oct. 24, 2010

A cruise ship sinks and three men manage to make it to a deserted island. The first man, a Jewish Rabbi, kneels on the sand and prays to God to send help. The second man, a Roman Catholic priest, kneels on the sand and prays to Jesus to save him. The third man, a wealthy business man watches the other two and then says, “You don’t need to pray like that, I’ve already got it all taken care of.” The other two say, “What do you mean? No one knows where we are - prayer is all we’ve got.” “No, you don’t understand”, he says, “I’m a wealthy business man, in fact, I bring in nearly a million dollars a year for income.” “So, how does that help us?” asks the priest. “Well, each year I pledge to my church. This year I just signed a pledge card and agreed to tithe. I’m sure my pastor is already searching for me. Don’t worry, my congregation will find me!”

I think the wealthy business man and the Pharisee in today’s reading might be friends. Their sense of rightness with God and their church seems to settle on what they can do for God, what right actions they might take. And let’s not be too hard on them. The business man might be right – his congregation probably does want him found and his tithe guaranteed. And I bet the Pharisee’s synagogue had taught him to behave just as he was behaving – to fast, to observe times of prayer, to give his tithe. In fact, the start of his prayer even follows a common rabbinical expression of thanksgiving which is prefaced by a reference to personal behavior. The Pharisee is not a villain but rather represents complete dedication to observing the law of Moses.

Nor is the tax collector a paragon of virtue. There is a reason the Pharisee grouped him in with the thieves, rogues and adulterers. His life is offensive, and he is a traitor working for the Roman oppressors.

And hollow prayer is hollow prayer no matter who we are or what we do.

But Jesus is direct in the reason he tells this parable. He tells it to warn self-righteous people who regard other people as less than themselves. Our translation says “regarded others with contempt.” Contempt is pretty much the same as hate and that’s one I had drilled into me by my mother. If I said I hated someone, she would correct me and say, “You don’t hate someone – hate is bad. Maybe you dislike them.” All right, whatever. So I don’t hate others. But do I look down on them and think my life is better. That is the translation used in The Message. And then I can honestly say, sometimes. Just think of the phrase in our culture – “There but for the grace of God go I.” Isn’t that the same as separating ourselves from others? Those people are not like me – thank heavens. And then we thank God that our life is better than someone else’s as though God was creating that separation between me and someone else. I believe Jesus is saying, “if you think you are better than someone else, be careful.” Your prayer will be a hollow one and your attitude will prevent you from recognizing God in your midst.

And just think of the people you and I might separate ourselves from – people who might not be acceptable to us. I find myself tending to separate myself from people in other denominations and religious traditions. And then there are immigrants, adulterers, people in ghettos, old people that are hidden away, homeless folks, uppity

folks, crude people, people in the neighboring town, perhaps people in our congregation. If we are honest I think the list might be quite long. We evaluate ourselves by saying; “Well at least I am not like them.”

And I find it interesting in today’s parable that both the tax collector and the Pharisee go and stand apart from others to do their praying. Maybe that is a matter of solitude for praying but it seems to me that neither one is acknowledging the other. And I wonder what it would have happened if they had taken time to meet each other. What would it be like to have the Pharisee and tax collector say their prayers together?

I just finished a book in which the Pharisee and tax collector meet each other. Only in today’s version they are a wealthy art dealer and a homeless man. In 1969 Deborah and Ron Hall were married in Fort Worth, Texas. He had a beginning level job in banking as he finished a business degree in night school. But two years later, Ron began to buy and sell art as a sideline. He saw a great opportunity to make a lot of money and secretly borrowing – or stealing - some shares of stocks that belonged to his wife, he soon shot to the apex of the art world as a dealer in art and gallery owner. He and his wife had also turned their lives over to Christ and were active in a church. He thought he was doing all things well (he could have easily prayed the prayer of the Pharisee) little knowing that his wife did not share his passion for wealth and fame. Their marriage hit rock bottom 10 years later and in an effort to avoid divorce they entered counseling and made some changes. One change for Ron was to begin paying more attention to what his wife was involved with. She wanted to do more for poor people and asked him to accompany her to a downtown homeless shelter to serve an evening meal.

The mission was tucked deep in a nasty part of town and although Ron agreed to go with Deborah, he figured it would just make him look good and she would be appalled and they would move on with their lives. It didn’t work that way.

Deborah had them keep going back. And she learned people’s name and histories and she loved them. She threw birthday parties for the regular attendees. Then she began offering make-up and hair styling sessions for the women and she asked Ron to try befriending some of the men. One day she shared a vision with Ron that God told her that they needed to reach out to the meanest, nastiest, coldest man that came there for meals.

That man was Denver Moore and he wasn’t interested in getting close to no body. He had been homeless for over thirty years and he had done some mean and ugly things with his life. He figured he wasn’t worthy for God or any other human being.

You see, we could have taken Ron and Denver and stood them next to the Pharisee and tax collector. A wealthy, successful, self-satisfied church-goer in the same room but totally separated emotionally from the dirty, distant, and angry homeless man that knew he was not worth much in the eyes of society and perhaps the Lord.

But always, Deborah was the one who kept praying, who kept her heart open, who took next steps and slowly miracles unfolded. The story is told in the book, *“Same Kind of Different as Me”*. In the words of Denver Moore at the end of the book, “I used to spend a lotta time worryin that I was different from other people, even from other homeless folks. Then, after I met Miss Debbie and Mr. Ron, I worried that I was so different from them that we wadn’t ever gon’ have no kind a’ future. But I found out everybody’s different – the same kind of different as me. We’re all just regular folks walkin down the road God done set in front of us.”

Their story is an inspiring miracle – yet I know it happens in other places and in other ways. We have no reason to separate ourselves from others, or to pray assuming that what seems good to us must be the will of God. Let us have humility about who we each are and let us keep our eyes open to seeing who else shares our world and

is our neighbor. It is only in humility that true, fruitful prayer becomes the opening of ourselves as best we can to the glorious life of God, letting God live in us. And at that moment – in that prayer - all divisions will cease. And then we will have made a start – a really good start – to the healing of this planet.

Thanks be to God.