

“How the Light Gets in?” 07, Oct 28,
 Luke 18: 9- 14 Tax Collector and Pharisee-

This week I accidentally sent a bill payment to myself- you know those window envelopes where the sheet you insert displays the address- I had the sheet of paper the wrong way round to show my own address, and sure enough - it came right back to me.

That’s rather what the Pharisee’s prayer is like- supposedly sent off to God, but it goes nowhere- When the Pharisee leaves the temple, nothing has changed. Maybe WE feel that sometimes, after worship or prayer- we just haven’t connected. Nothing has changed.

The Pharisee certainly tried to address his prayer to God, but it was full of “me, me, me!” and so it remained with him and there was no change. It’s not that he WASN’T a good man- he was.

At LEAST as good as ANY of us. He gave a tenth of his income for God’s work. That’s impressive- I wonder how many of us do that? He kept all the commandments – the basic tenet of the ten commandments is that you don’t take what is not yours, whether it belongs to God or to another. Are we so scrupulous in our dealings?

He WAS a moral man. Maybe not someone you’d want to LIVE with, -he’d want to let you KNOW just how moral he was - but is that such a SIN? Is that a reason for his prayers not being answered?

Don’t good people deserve some consideration from God? He seemed to think so. And this was actually his problem. As Jesus said, he was confident of his righteousness and he relied on it.

There is ZEN story about a student who badly wants to become a disciple of a very famous ZEN master. And so he tells the master about all the people he has already studied under and how much he has advanced in learning.

The master is silent. And the more silent he is, the more the student goes on and on about his achievements, trying to impress the master into accepting him.

While he is talking, the master just picks up the teapot sitting in front of them and begins to pour tea into a cup. He pours and pours until it reaches the top, and he keeps on pouring, and the tea begins to overflow..

The student sees what is happening, and cries out in alarm, “Master, stop, the cup is full, you cannot pour more into it!”

And the master says, “Yes, and so are YOU - full - of what you know - How can I teach you, when you are already so full?”

Coming to God in prayer is like offering ourselves as vessels for the Holy Spirit. God needs us to leave some room for God to work. When we’re full of our own achievements and certain of our goodness, we have no NEED of God’s grace. And it seems that what attracts God’s Spirit is NEED, EMPTINESS.

Blessed, says Jesus, are those who are empty- blessed are the poor in Spirit, blessed are those who mourn,- Blessed are those who yearn for righteousness: It's the emptiness in us that draws the Spirit of God

The tax collector is blessed because he knows his poverty, he knows his failure, he knows his wrong doing, and he mourns before God, mourns in the face of his own weakness, his wrong decisions. And he longs for what he is lacking, he longs for righteousness, longs to be cleansed and be made whole.

And it is into our longing, into our yearning that the Holy Spirit comes to reshape and to make us new.

All that the tax collector can say is "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner". He doesn't bring excuses, he doesn't compare himself to anyone, he doesn't blame anyone else, he just throws himself on God's mercy.

In contrast, the Pharisee does what so many of us do in order to justify ourselves- he compares himself to other people- Thank God I'm not like these other people, he says. Thieves, rogues, adulterers.

We can always find someone who has done worse than we have. I've never killed anyone. I've not tortured anyone. I've not abused a child. I can't be all that bad, right? I'm not trying to say that we should beat ourselves up over every error of judgment. And Jesus is not saying this.

He's saying we should not come to God in prayer with an attitude of being superior to other people, we should not come with contempt in our hearts. Elsewhere Jesus says that we should never call another "raka" "a fool"- that this attitude of contempt cuts us off from others and allows us to abuse and even kill them. .

What is offensive to God is our pride and judgment that cuts us off from others. When Jesus disciples say, "master, teach us to pray, " what is the very first word of prayer that Jesus gives them?

OUR- Our father, the right spirit for prayer is a spirit of community, of identification with our brothers and sisters.

A man was sharing with me just this week his response to beggars in the street. He said that he finds himself saying "Thank God I'm not like this beggar" and since I was working on this sermon, all my antennae went up- "tell me more", I said.

"Well", he said, "then I feel really bad, I feel unworthy, because I know I'm not supposed to feel that way- it puts me up here and him down there- I'm feeling pity and I should be feeling compassion."

And I'm thinking now, "yes!" That is the most wonderful response! I'm sure God and all the heavens are saying, "yes! Here is someone God can WORK with- Here is someone who's making ROOM for God to work in him! Here is FERTILE GROUND to SOW seeds of love and compassion"

Like the Tax Collector, throwing himself on God's mercy. When we lay aside our pride, when we face our shortcomings, whether small or large, the Holy Spirit can do something new in our lives.

Sue Mosteller in her book, "Light through the Crack" tells this story. Sue is a nun, director of Daybreak, the L'Arche institute north of Toronto, a good person. In telling this story, she confesses to an ADDICTION that defeats her and shames her daily- an addiction to food.

The story she tells is of Joshua- HIS addiction is to alcohol and drugs. Born to a 16 year old alcoholic mother, he was adopted by very loving parents, but he suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome, and at age 11 started drinking and doing drugs, and this led to a suicide attempt and his being put in rehab.

There he was told that his parents had legally disowned him, that he was now a ward of state until he turned 18. The tragedy is that they had done no such thing, but the knowledge of being disowned totally hardened him.

When he left the institution at age 18, the journey was a downward spiral, drug dealing, living on the streets, suicide attempts. In the end, it was either die or change, and he voluntarily went back into rehab, where he struggled to work through the 12 step program.

The most challenging step being Step Four: Step Four is to make a fearless inventory of all the wrongs one has done. Joshua found he had a tremendous RESISTANCE to seeing his own wrong doing. He realized that ever since his parents had disowned him, he'd adopted a "victim" mentality- everything was THEIR fault.

He says that the moment he chose to stop blaming them was the moment that something began to move in his heart.

That IS the moment when God can begin to work in us, when we're no longer looking at other people, we're no longer doing comparisons or judgments of others. But our eyes are on God and on ourselves.

When we're honest about our failings and wrong doings, we become fertile ground for the Holy Spirit. A moment of truth before God, and a decision to be honest with ourselves yields an abundance beyond all our calculations.

Joshua now lives and works with the severely disabled, sponsors others in their road to sobriety, and his story of what he has overcome inspires countless others, including the nun, Sue Mosteller.

Many of us expect that the Christian walk is a kind of upward journey, where we strive to be good and to do good, and we get to be better and better until we can stand before God at judgment day, when God will check off the good things we've done, and reward us accordingly.

But actually the Christian journey is not upward at all- it's a downward journey. The one whom we follow and from whom we take the name Christian entered this world as a

helpless baby and exited the world condemned, humiliated, in the depths of agony on a cross.

And he taught that the path to Life (with a capital L) is to let go of life. So while we're maybe striving to go up the escalator, Jesus is on the escalator beside us going DOWN, and if we want to meet him, we have to go down too- to the basement of our lives.

It's there that we encounter the power and the grace of God, so that we can become as we're intended to be.

Our prayers need to be the kind of prayers that open us to God's grace. Like the "sinner's prayer"- that's what the Tax Collector's prayer has come to be known as: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Whoever we are, we have need of grace and we need to pray this prayer. Whether our lives are ostensibly together or whether we have clearly stumbled and fallen, the sinner's prayer is a way for us all to invite the power and light of God into our lives.

When we pray the sinner's prayer, we recognize that we are no different from others and so we come to God in a spirit of community. When we pray the sinner's prayer we recognize that we too have fallen short, and thus we make ROOM for God.

There is good news here, whether our failings are small, or whether they're so great we don't think we'll ever recover from the shame.

The good news is that the Spirit of God seeks out those empty places in us and is just looking for a crack, to come in and fill us with the new life that we long for, just waiting for a chance to summon out from us what we are meant to be.

The name of Sue Mosteller's book, "Light Through the Crack" comes from a song written by Leonard Cohen. "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in".

We who are followers of Jesus are called to be vessels of light. And we CAN be, if we're willing to bring the cracks of our lives to God, so that God's light can fill us.

To God be all the praise, the honour and the glory.

Amen.