

“Empty Out”
Message by DD Adams
Providence United Methodist Church
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Today’s gospel lesson comes from the book of Luke, chapter 18, verses 9 through 14. I’ll be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But 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!’ I 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.” This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God.

Jesus taught a lesson on prayer in this portion of Scripture. He tells a parable of two men going up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. He obeyed all the requirements of the traditions of the elders and Levitical law and observed all religious duties. Anyone who was ignorant of what *his* life centered on he looked down on.

Pharisees were legalistic and thought heaven could only be attained by what was done externally—through physical acts of worship. They were disdained by many, but also were seen by some as respectable and committed religious people. The tax collector, who was also going up to the temple was probably dishonest—as

most of them were. They were despised and thought of as traitors and stood on the margins of respectability. These two men went up to the temple to pray. I doubt if they walked together.

Jesus said in verse nine that the Pharisee trusted in himself and had contempt for others. The Pharisee had an “I” problem. Some might call it an “eye” problem. His vision was eclipsed. He didn’t take advantage of the light that God gives to search and examine his heart. He only examined others. In his prayer, he tells God all that he’s done to earn his righteousness. He’s really not praying to God at all. He’s praying *with himself*.

The tax collector stood at a distance. Maybe he doesn’t feel worthy to come near the religious Pharisee. He doesn’t even consider himself *worthy* enough to look up to heaven. He cries out for mercy to God. He bows down and throws himself on the ground yielding his body, his attitude, and his whole self. He remembers where he came from, who he is, and all he’s done and hasn’t done. Jesus said this man went home to heaven justified because he was humble.

Here we have a contrast between two men. The Pharisee relies on his self-accomplishments and informs God of all he’s done. The tax collector sees his unworthiness and leans on the forgiveness and mercy of God Take a look at the back of the bulletin. Ginny Thornburgh, director of the American Association of People with Disabilities’ Interfaith Initiatives says, “Of all the barriers to full participation and inclusion, the barrier of *unexamined attitudes* is the most difficult to address. There are no barriers to God’s love, there should be no barriers in God’s house.”

No barriers to God’s love. No barriers with God. No barriers because we strive to examine our attitudes when we may have excluded others based on differences or our past knowledge of who we think they are now. Really what we

should be striving to do is to bring others into our circles who feel on the outside. And what's the circle anyway? The circle is God's love; it's what we aim for—it's the bulls' eye on the target. It's what everyone wants and needs—each other's love and God's.

We're all in need of God's love. We're all sinners in need of God's mercy. We compare ourselves with others at times and feel superior. But God says when we do that we lack understanding. What we're to strive for is to be like God. We're to include and invite, and to not base our attitude about someone on what we thought was their past behavior. We need to line our self up to God not compare our self to someone we think doesn't measure up to who we think we are.

What the Pharisee forgot was that God *does* forgive sinners. God forgives where we want to hold someone to who they used to be. We're all sinners, and God actually does pardon and restore sinners to a place of right standing. God frees all who cry out for mercy and seek to be at peace with God. When we compare ourselves to others we make a serious mistake. The Pharisee compared his life with those of other men whom he considered lower on the religious ladder of success. The tax collector compared his life only with the righteousness of God.

Who are you like, the Pharisee or the tax collector? Maybe you're somewhere in-between, but what do you feel is the attitude of your prayer throughout the day? The Pharisee had prayer *with* himself, but that wasn't what God had in mind. To have prayer with yourself is to be full of yourself, and you're so full of who you are it's difficult to change who you really want to be. Our aim is to be a better Christian disciple, and to walk in God's ways.

The tax collector knew he was unworthy. He knew he needed God to change his character. The Pharisee thought he was all he needed to be. He was self-righteous and arrogant. What the Pharisee needed was to empty out all those

qualities that kept him from experiencing the power of God. The Pharisee had an “I” problem. He was so full of himself he couldn’t see and experience God. The tax collector prayed to God for mercy, and that’s what he got. Let’s challenge ourselves to be more like God and to put ourselves next to God if we’re looking for a comparison. The challenge is to remain humble in our thinking of who we think we are and to allow humility to express itself in prayer. Let’s allow the Holy Spirit to show us where we come up short. Let’s see our need for change.

Let’s pray. Dear God who created and formed us, work within our hearts as we humble ourselves to you in all earnestness. Show us immediately when we exclude someone from our circles. Let’s make our circle of love larger and strive to let everyone in. Let there be no exceptions. Move us to love those we have excluded in the past. Help us to embrace those who feel on the outside as we minister to everyone regardless of differences. Let us help to empty out who we are so we might be filled with you, God. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.