

October 23, 2022
Luke 18:9-14

Pentecost 20
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“I Need Thee Every Hour”

“... for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Dorothy Brown always prided herself on being a self-sufficient person. She was the oldest of eight children raised on the family farm and was often left to fend for herself and care for her younger siblings while her parents were out in the fields or in the barn. She married her high school sweetheart and gave birth to three children, but her husband died young in a tragic accident at the factory, leaving her alone to raise her young children. She got a job as a legal secretary and was able to work a full-time job while raising the children on her own. She was able to buy a small house in town, which she kept immaculate both inside and out. She cooked for her children after a long day at work, did the laundry, kept the house clean, and took care of all the outside chores with help from her children as they grew older. When her children left for university and eventually got married, Dorothy stayed in the home she had bought and tended; she continued to cut the grass, tend her garden, rake the leaves, shovel the snow, and do all the necessary chores around the house. Her neighbours would offer to help, but Dorothy would always politely refuse, because being self-sufficient had become a key part of her identity and a source of great pride for this woman who had overcome many obstacles in her life.

Dorothy maintained her self-sufficient attitude when a load of firewood was delivered to her home and dumped in a large pile in her driveway. In the past, she was able to carry the firewood to the backyard and stack it in the shed; but this year, she discovered that she was tiring very quickly and had to take frequent breaks. It was during one of these breaks that Jessie, a ten-year-old girl who lived across the street, came over and asked Dorothy if she could help. Even though she was exhausted, her pride was still strong as she thanked Jessie but assured her that she could do the job by herself. But Jessie would have none of this: “Miss Dorothy, no one can do it all on their own. That is why God gave us other people, and we need to take care of one another!” Dorothy knew that her young neighbour was right; so, for the first time, she accepted the help of another person, and in a short time Jessie carried all of the firewood and stacked it neatly in the shed. It was a moment of profound change for Dorothy, who realized how fortunate she was to have someone as caring as Jessie to come to her assistance in a time of need.

The ideal of the self-sufficient person, the myth of the “self-made man,” has a powerful attraction for many people. We like to think that we can take care of ourselves, that we have the strength, knowledge, and resources to fulfill any task and overcome any obstacle without looking to others for assistance. But life often teaches us that being self-sufficient is not possible; none of us has all the skills and abilities needed to accomplish every task. For people of faith, it is a reminder that God created us to live in community so that we might care for one another and share each other’s burdens. At creation, God announced that *“it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”* (Genesis 2:18). In the covenant that is established with Abraham, God promises that *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”* (Genesis 12:2). One of Jesus’ first acts after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness is to gather disciples, and throughout his ministry Jesus is almost always in the company of others. He proclaims that Peter will be the rock upon which *“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”* (Matthew 16:18); “church” (*ekklesia*) literally means “assembly,” and the work of the apostles will be to gather people together into the church which is the body of Christ, a body where each member depends on the other for support, strength, and for fulfilling the will of our Lord for God’s people:

- “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” – Romans 12:4-8.

No member of the church is self-sufficient; as the body relies on its many parts to properly function, we are dependent on one another for our health and vitality. There are no self-made persons within the community of faith, since all of us are made members of this church through our baptism into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are members of a community instituted by our Lord, one in which we are dependent on God’s mercies and on the blessings of our sisters and brothers in Christ.

This is a lesson that Jesus emphasizes in today’s Gospel lesson, a parable that presents two very different characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector. This parable extends the theme of prayer found in the previous parable of the persistent widow, who is presented as a role model for the power of unceasing prayer. Jesus follows

this parable with one in which “*two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector*” (Luke 18:10). People “*went up*” to Jerusalem due to its high elevation, and the Temple was situated at the highest point in the city. Praying at the Temple is an underlying motif that runs throughout Luke and into Acts; Zechariah is praying at the Temple when the angel Gabriel visits him and announces that “*your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.*” (1:13). Anna “*never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day*” (2:37) until she came into the presence of the infant Jesus with his parents, at which point she “*began to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*” (2:38). After the ascension of our Lord, his disciples “*worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*” (24:53). As they began their apostolic ministry, “*Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon.*” (Acts 3:1). The Temple was the center of the worship and prayer life of the people of Israel, and persons from all walks of life could be found within its confines – including two vastly different characters: a respectable Pharisee and a despised tax collector. Even though the Pharisees have been portrayed in a negative light in earlier passages in Luke (“*And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*” – 15:2), they were known as devout persons who were highly respected within Jesus’ community. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were universally reviled:

- “Working for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people, a participant in a cruel and corrupt system, politically a traitor, religiously unclean, a publican was a reprehensible character.” – Fred Craddock.

The readers of this parable would have recognized the Pharisee as a devout person and the tax collector as a stereotypical sinner, and their positions and prayers confirm this difference. Jesus reports that the Pharisee is “*standing by himself*” (18:11); the Pharisees separated themselves from others to maintain their ritual purity before God, so this Pharisee takes a position that reflects his identity. His prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving, but one that soon reveals itself to be self-serving. Instead of thanking God for all the blessings he has received (“*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.*” – Psalm 100:4), the Pharisee gives thanks to God “*that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, and even like this tax collector.*” As his prayer continues, so does his absorption in his own virtue: “*I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.*” (18:12). Fasting and tithing, actions prescribed in the Torah, are used by the Pharisee as proofs of his piety that he offers to God:

- “Jehoshaphat was afraid; he set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.” – 2 Chronicles 20:3.
- “Set aside a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.” – Deuteronomy 14:22-23.

The Pharisee asks nothing of God in his prayer. He presumes that he is not a sinner, and that his fasting and tithing are ample evidence of his piety. He sees himself as a self-sufficient person who needs no assistance from God or other persons; his prayer gives no evidence of either humility or contrition before God. His prayer is nothing like Jesus’ teaching on prayer when he gives his disciples what is known to us as the Lord’s Prayer.

- “That prayer is entirely God-centric, opening with God’s name, kingdom, and will, and then moving to our need of him for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance. This prayer is the prayer of one who has no need of anyone or anything because he is already in himself perfect, especially with respect to the wretched tax collector.” – Meda Stamper.

If the Pharisee asks nothing of God and sees no need of requiring any assistance from the Lord, the tax collector boasts of nothing before God. His body language communicates his attitude of unworthiness: “*standing far off, [he] would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast*” (18:13). His only words are a cry for help from the Lord: “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*” The tax collector’s cries echo the words of Psalm 51, a prayer of confession that is addressed to God as the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation:

- “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” – Psalm 51:1-2.

While the Pharisee sees himself as entirely self-sufficient and in need of no assistance from anyone in heaven and on earth, the tax collector knows that he cannot justify himself, make himself right with God or with others. Then throws himself entirely on God’s mercy, crying out to God to forgive his transgressions and restore him to newness of life:

- “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.” – Psalm 51:10-12.

To an audience that had been conditioned to respect Pharisees and despise tax collectors, Jesus offers a shocking reversal in telling this parable “*to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:*” (18:9). They may have found themselves identifying with the Pharisees, believing that their piety in keeping the Torah commandments made them righteous in the eyes of God and others. But while Jesus often directly challenged such attitudes of the Pharisees directly (“*You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God*” – 16:15), disciples and believers in Jesus’ audience are just as vulnerable to pride and self-righteousness as the Pharisee. Their expectations as to how the parable would end would be disrupted when Jesus announces that “*I tell you, this man [the tax collector] 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.*” (18:14). This reversal is in keeping with the song of Mary (*Magnificat*) in which the mother of our Lord rejoices in God who “*has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty*” (1:51-53). Trusting in oneself, like the Pharisee, is a position of blindness before God. Like the strong man who trusted in his armour (11:21-22), it is foolish for anyone – even those considered the most righteous in the community – to trust in their own righteousness.

- “Let us consider this fool, the Pharisee. He does the most glorious works! First, he thanks God. He fasts twice a week for the glory of God. He gives a tenth of all his worldly goods. He has not committed adultery, he has never done violence to anyone or stolen anything. He has led such a saintly life. Would you not call that an honourable life? Indeed, the world would have to praise him. In fact, he praises himself. But there, at that moment, God’s judgment falls on him, saying that all his works are blasphemy. Lord God, have mercy! How terrible is this judgment! We are shocked to the limit, for not one of us is half as saintly as the Pharisee!” – Martin Luther, 1522.

The Pharisee’s sin was not that he ignored or disobeyed the commandments of God; his sin was that he believed that because he was so righteous and observant that he

had no need of God or others. The tax collector, on the other hand, proves to be the true role model in the story because he recognizes that he is totally in need of God's grace and forgiveness, that *"by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him"* (Small Catechism). He recognizes that he cannot make himself right with God, and he throws himself completely on the mercy of God whose *"steadfast love endures forever"* (Psalm 118:1). The tax collector becomes a role model for what is at the heart of our Lutheran teaching, that we are justified not by our own works or efforts but solely by the grace of God that is ours in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that, in the words of Paul, *"there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement, effective through faith ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."* (Romans 3:23-25, 28). We believe and teach as Lutheran Christians that *"we cannot obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfaction, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us."* (Augsburg Confession, Article IV). We know that we cannot do it on our own, that in the words of the Gospel hymn that *"I need thee every hour, in joy or pain; come quickly and abide, or life is vain."* We know that it is through the gift of baptism that we are born anew through water and the word, are claimed by our Lord as God's beloved and children and heirs of the fullness of God's blessings. We know that we are dependent on God and God alone for all blessings, that *"there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less"* (Philip Yancey). We know that the good news in this Gospel story is that we are all like the tax collector: we are all sinners, unable to make ourselves right before God, but made righteous through the merciful love of God who *"so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life."* (John 3:16).

- "The strangely good news of the parable is that the role of the tax collector is available to all of us. We, and everyone around us, are all sinners and all beloved children of the gracious Father. The parable invites us to experience the freedom that comes with casting away our flimsy armour and throwing ourselves into the arms of God, who is already there, who has already found us, who wants more than anything to lift us up and lead us home." – Stamper.

Dorothy Brown's attitude toward herself and others changed after that day in her driveway. Faced with a task that was overwhelming, she realized that the words of her young neighbour were true: she could not do it on her own, nor did she have to do it on her own. In her pride of self-sufficiency, she denied her own limits as a human being and denied her neighbour the privilege of helping her. From that day forward, she would gladly accept the assistance of others, and in the process, she became a more grateful and happy person. We were not created to live alone, and we cannot accomplish all things by ourselves. God created us to live together in community, to *"bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ"* (Galatians 6:2). True righteousness comes in recognizing that we cannot accomplish anything on our own, that we are in need every day of God's mercy, God's blessing, and God's community that is called to *"share our mutual woes, our mutual burden's bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear"* (ELW Hymn 656). In baptism, we become God's children, born anew to a living hope; every day, may we turn to God as the source of all our physical and spiritual needs, because none of us can make it on our own, for *"I need thee, O I need thee; every hour I need thee! O bless me now, my Saviour, I come to Thee!"*

Amen.