

"The Planned Failure of Prayer"

Luke 18:9-14

Church of the Good Shepherd- Episcopal- Nashua, NH

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*Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*

Sixteen more days. If you have to ask "Sixteen more days until what?" then I wish you a very warm welcome (giving the Vulcan "Live long and prosper sign with my hand) because I assume you are a visitor from a planet in a galaxy far, far away from this swing state.

Sixteen more days until the Presidential Election... and it can't be over soon enough for most of us.

People are reporting signs of "Election Stress Disorder" on all fronts: increased anxiety and reactivity, less productivity and more stress at home and work, drivers more aggressive than usual, women reporting that the campaign rhetoric makes them feel unsafe, people posting political rants on Facebook and "un-friending" those who disagree with their views. We are living in crazy town. And no matter how hard we try to get away from it, all roads appear to lead back to the presidential election. It is as if everything we hear and see is through the filter of the election.

Saturated as we are with political rhetoric, we can't help but see our gospel story through the lens of politics. We hear the opening words: "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt," and of course we know who he means. We assume the self-righteous Pharisee is the Democrat who comes to church thinking: "Thank God I'm not like those deplorable Republicans." Or perhaps he is the Republican who stands there thinking:

"Thank God I'm not like those corrupt and nasty Democrats." Or if the Pharisee is the Undecided voter then he can look with contempt upon both major parties. The two characters in the story are deeply divided, as is our society right now. Self-righteous polarization cuts deep into the fabric of human communities and does damage to family, religious communities, and across society. You might believe that ties of blood may be thicker than the bonds formed in the waters of Baptism, but *both* can be compromised by our fraught political stands.

If I am to preach as I was taught in seminary with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, then naturally I look for those places where the narrative of our presidential campaign and the biblical narrative speak to one another. If nothing else, Luke's story reminds us that we can't get away from Empire and its impact on our lives, not even in holy spaces.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector are bit players caught up in the larger narrative of the Roman Empire's power to define who they are and to shape the world they live in. Each is coping with the reality of being oppressed by Empire in their own way. The Pharisee is trying to cope with the pervasive presence of Empire through separation. His attitude of superiority is a self-protective defense. His practices of religious piety and ritual create distance, which shields him from being contaminated by Empire.

The Tax Collector copes in a different way. He participates in a system that is inherently corrupt, serving the Empire by working for the IRS. Who knows what decisions or circumstances led him to that place, but the Tax Collector is well aware of the moral injury he suffers from his engagement with Empire. They each cope in a way that the other might find offensive. You could even see the two men as a metaphor for two polarized political parties.

Polarized coping strategies might help a people get through

a difficult time, but they pay a price. And the price we all pay for polarization, this "othering," is that we forget our common humanity. We become rigid, judgmental, superior, and distance ourselves. "Thank God I'm not like *that*." And the chasm between us grows even wider. Can this story help us to find our way back toward one another? Maybe the Big Clue here is that this story happens in the context of prayer.

After obsessing over election news for the past few weeks, I decided to abstain from checking the election news so frequently by taking a "news fast." While taking that break and creating some space to think, it finally occurred to me that perhaps I should try and pray for *both* of the major presidential candidates. As a little bonus, maybe I would even try doing a Loving-Kindness Meditation for the candidate who makes me a little crazy.

In Loving-kindness meditation, or Metta meditation, you repeat several phrases while keeping the person you are praying for in mind: "May you be safe, may you be peaceful, may you be well, may you live with ease." In Metta meditation you're supposed to start with people you love, then acquaintances, then strangers, ever widening the circle to include others, even your "enemies," until ultimately you pray these prayers for all beings.

So I imagined my least favorite candidate and started: "May you be... May you. May you be safe. Um. May. You. Be. May you be peaceful..." OK, so let's just say it didn't go very well. This kind of prayer was really hard and I wasn't good at it.

Lucky for us Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says that this kind of prayer and meditation is "planned and organized failure." *You mean to tell me if I try to pray for someone who makes my teeth itch, I'm going to fail at that?* Yes. Rohr says that when we pray for union with God and others "Usually you meet your own incapacity for and resistance to union. You encounter your thinking, judging, controlling, accusing, blaming, fearing mind."

In other words, you are going to be miserably bad at praying for "the other." And you will have to do it again and again before something slowly begins to shift in you. You will fail at loving-kindness prayer. But the important thing is to do it anyway because it will change you.

I wish Jesus had added more layers to this story about prayer. I wish the two men could have sat down with one another, looked each other in the eyes and told their story. I can hear the Pharisee admit how exhausting it is to try and do it all himself, to keep it together, to always be so perfect and beyond reproach. To confess that his anger and fear eats him alive. And I wish the Tax Collector could have talked about the price he paid for selling his soul to the Empire, and how trapped he felt every time he worked for The Man.

I want to hear the Pharisee and the Tax Collector say to one another: "Just like me you are afraid, worried, anxious, and starving for someone to see you with compassion and mercy." I want to see the deep gulf between them be healed by compassion. I want to see them find their common ground in God.

And in this story I want to see both of them walk away from the Temple a changed person. As Jesus tells it, the Pharisee leaves being the same person he was when he walked through the Temple doors. His prayer was all about reinforcing his view of himself. He didn't risk being vulnerable. He rigidly held to his view of himself and the Tax Collector. But the Tax Collector prays a prayer of failure; of struggle and agony so painful that he can't even lift his eyes to heaven. And yet he is the one who goes away a changed man.

And so here is the question that this story poses: Will you leave this place a different person than you were when you walked through the door? When you sit next to "the other" and both hear the same loving word of God, when you kneel at the altar and receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ, when you

hear each other's voice sing thanksgiving to God...will it soften something within you toward the one who seems so foreign to you? Will the way you pray under the same roof with your friends *and* your enemies reinforce the distance between you or will it change you? Will you risk "failing" at praying for "the other" in a way that opens your heart up?

I'm asking you to finish this sermon as you decide who you will be when you leave this place. I'm inviting us all to follow Jesus' invitation to move from contempt to compassion and connection. Will prayer for the "other" be something at which you struggle and fail, a prayer that deeply changes you, making you into a more compassionate and loving person? You tell me. Amen.