

Pentecost XXII (30 C)  
*Joel 2.21-32/Psalm 65/ II Timothy 4.7-22/Luke 18.9-14*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
28 October 2007

Spiritual Ecology

~Paul H. Friesen~

*Last Sunday we were told by Jesus how to pray without losing heart. Jesus told story about a widow seeking justice from a corrupt judge, and assured us that if that widow got justice in the end so we would get through to a fair and righteous God.*

Today we have heard the next few verses of Luke's Gospel. *Today we're told how to pray without giving up honesty.*

But a trip to the doctor's office is probably not what you were thinking about when you listened a few minutes ago to the famous parable of a certain Pharisee and a certain tax-collector who went up to the temple to pray. But it was exactly what St. Augustine was thinking about 1600 years ago when he was writing a sermon for the people of his city in North Africa.

Augustine zeroed in on the differences between the two approaches to prayer in terms of two different approaches to visiting the family physician:

'The Pharisee,' he said, 'was not rejoicing so much in his own clean bill of health is in comparing it with the diseases of others. He came to the doctor. It would have been more worthwhile to inform him by confession of the things that were wrong with himself instead of keeping his wounds secret and having the nerve to [exalt himself] over others.'<sup>1</sup>

Augustine wasn't saying that sin and forgiveness is really a private affair—we are in fact all part of a connected whole. The self-righteous man wanted to distance himself from everyone else, that's why he stood by himself in the temple, as if God were his buddy. And that's why he started comparing himself to others.

The tax-collector had it right, said Jesus in the parable. This sinner was far off from the self-righteous man but praying to God at the same moment. He wasn't far off because he thought himself better—he was back with the rest of the crowd where he felt he belonged. But the tax collector didn't compare himself with anyone else in hopes of an advantage in God's sight. He simply assumed he was part of the sinful mob of humanity. His eyes were turned down as he beat

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<sup>1</sup> *Sermon 351.1.* As cited by Arthur A. Just in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p.279.

his chest and said 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' He understood that he stood in solidarity with all the sinners of the world. And we know from the parable that God blesses this approach to prayer. Perhaps he had heard the psalm we read today: 'When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.'

*So, how does this parable teach us to pray without giving up honesty?*

Well it is a parable, a story, and sometimes it's easy to enjoy a parable, and even get the point of it, the 'punch-line', but still feel the parable points somewhere else, not at us. After all, Pharisees and tax-collector and rich men and beggars and various kinds of 'sinners' showed up in many of Jesus' parables—this parable is a bit like a joke that would begin, 'Did you hear the one about the Archdeacon and the night-club owner who happened to kneel down next to each other during communion at the Cathedral? It would be easy to chuckle and think we weren't involved.

It might feel like this with the parable we just heard. But, in fact we are all involved, especially according to this parable.

According to Jesus' parable we simply can't separate ourselves from the mob. This is the mystery of what we might call God's 'ecology'—that is the way in which God's whole world fits together. There are no exemptions, no special privileges that free us from the impact of others on our lives, or allow others to escape the consequences of our actions. The Pharisee didn't understand this. We affect, and are affected, by all that others do, and they are affected by what we do. The tax-collector understood God's spiritual 'ecology' and so fully acknowledged his contribution to global sinfulness and so was able to enjoy God's forgiveness and blessing ('he was exalted' we are told.)

We are aware more every week of how the climate in one part of our globe is affected by what happens a long way off, and we're aware of how the sum total of all our bad decisions about the world's resources is being multiplied beyond belief. Our Scriptures today urge us to think about spiritual life in the same way. God has created us to live in an interconnected web. If we live in harmony with this great truth, we shall be blessed together. When we ignore our interconnections we harm others and bring harm on ourselves.

*The first great truth about spiritual ecology is that we begin to enjoy our shared world and shared church when we acknowledge our complete dependence on each other.*

'In the beginning...'—we are told in all the biblical stories of creation that God brought into existence a society, not a bunch of individuals. We are told that the good news of the Gospel created a church, not a collection of individuals enjoying spiritual blessings. And we are told that the mission of the church weaves us together in a common goal—sharing the whole Gospel, the good news of Christ's redemption in words, and worship and all that we are and all that we

have. To accept this is to accept God's spiritual ecology, the deep ways in which God has fit us together.

So Christian hope for our individual lives and for the life of the church depends on our honesty—on the acknowledgment of our being connected together, like the parts of the human body.

'If the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?' This was the comical way the Apostle Paul presented the honest truth.<sup>2</sup>

Think about it for a minute, because sometimes the comical truth is the truth that awakens us. *Imagine* a worship service in the middle of winter in which the heat and the lights were left off and the plumbing didn't work because we excluded everyone from our fellowship with an interest in the building. *Or imagine* us all gathered at the front around the table pretending we were eating bread and drinking from an invisible cup. *Or imagine* the congregation being led in praise but hearing no sound outside the chancel because everyone is engaged in private, silent spiritual exercises. *Or imagine* us continuing to pray for all our parish ministries, but nothing actually happened except on Sunday morning between 9.00 and 12.30. *Or imagine* we were so busy in our ministries that we decided none of them required prayer (and anyways God was worshipped by our practical ministries) so we asked our Sexton to put cardboard cut-outs of ourselves in the pews on Sunday morning as none of us would actually be there!

These are all ridiculous scenarios of course, but like the parable, and like the apostle's illustrate something basic. *The first great truth about spiritual ecology is that we begin to enjoy our shared world and shared church when we acknowledge our complete dependence on each other.*

*The second great truth about spiritual ecology is that we awaken the world to redemption when we begin to truly work together.*

God's redemption of the world—God's reclaiming of creation depends on us depending on each other. In the prophecy of Joel God speaks of a deep spiritual ecology, the connectedness of everything God has made. 'Do not fear, O soil...O children of Zion be glad...I will pour out my spirit on all flesh'. The land God has made, the people of God who were called to worship him, and all of human society around the world will be affected by Christ's redemption.

Let's hear again what the prophet Joel said: 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream

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<sup>2</sup> *I Corinthians* 12.16-17 All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

dreams, and your young men will see visions. Even on male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' These were radical words in a world in which certain people were understood to be spiritual on behalf of others. They are still radical words today.

If God doesn't make exception, if Christ's redemption is for the whole world, then we need each other. We need each other's prophecies, and dreams and visions, and we need to participate in each other's salvation.

This begins when we gather together for worship. We need each other when we worship together. We need each other, but not just in the many, many assigned roles of a particular Sunday morning. We need to see each others faces, and hear each other's voices even if we aren't able to greet everyone. We need to feel each other's joys and griefs whenever we can.

We need to see God at work in each other—and to encourage, support, and challenge each other.

We need each other's prophecies, and dreams and visions, and we need to participate in God's work of salvation in each other's lives and in this city and beyond.

This continues when we are apart. Someone asked me this week about how we can know God's presence when we are not at worship together. And part of the answer—not the whole answer— is that we know God's presence when we pray for each other, and think about each other on our daily rounds or in the various ministries of the church committed to groups or individuals. We know God's presence even when we communicate with each other when not necessary. We're not left alone if we are a part of the body of Christ. We don't live in a 'Jesus and me' world, even when it feels a little bit like that.

To truly work together does not demand we are in each other's company constantly. The *Acts of the Apostles* quotes the prophecy from Joel we have heard this morning as it describes the birth of the church. And then it says: 'Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home.' We can't be in each other's company constantly. But we can live at all times in dependence on each other, and we can truly work together. I think about this as I go through the parish directory.

We are part of humanity. We are the body of Christ, knit together by Christ's redemption. To truly be thankful for each other, and to count on each other in our mission is, in fact, to thank God for the way we have been created and redeemed. To enter into our mission to the world demands we resist the hyper-individualism that confronts us daily. Above all it is to be grateful for each other, to pray like the tax-collector instead of the self-righteous man, whatever we happen to be doing. Amen.