

# AN HONEST CONVERSATION

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October 27, 2019

Pentecost 20

[Psalm 65:1-8](#)

[Luke 18:9-14](#)

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(prayer)

Of the four readings suggested for today by the Revised Common Lectionary, I chose to include only the Psalm and Gospel passages to be read this morning. But I want to briefly also make reference to the suggested Old Testament reading.

In [Joel, chapter two](#) (beginning at verse 23), the prophet praises God for rain that has come after a period of drought. Joel starts by referring to God in the third person:

*O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for the Lord has given the early rain for your vindication, the Lord has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing-floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.*

Then Joel switches to the first person -- speaking on behalf of God:

*I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,*

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The writings of *prophets of old* often include first person words of God. The implication is that God is speaking directly to the prophet and that person is passing on God's message as a sort of simultaneous translator.

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I suspect that I am not alone in having times when I have laid a question before God in prayer and would have loved to have been responded to directly.

Sure, it would have freaked me out, but after the shock wore off, I would have appreciated the clarity.

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I always find myself somewhere between envious and skeptical when I hear someone say: "God has spoken to me".

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Prayer is sometimes referred to being in *conversation* with God. But it is not typically the style of conversation we are used to.

Human conversations are clearest when held within the context of a common language and (hopefully) a common understanding.

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Prayer (by contrast) can feel like a one-sided conversation... with only us speaking. In our most lonely moments we might wonder if God is even listening, little lone capable or willing to respond.

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When people pray, there are typically three things they are hoping for:

- Prayers of *petition* - seeking God's intervention in this life: for ourselves, for others, for the created order itself. We can imagine the people in Joel's time offering prayers like: *Lord God,*

*this drought is taking its toll. The dryness has allowed the grasshoppers to get out of control; what little crops that 'are' growing are being eaten. Your people are going to starve. Please God, send of rain to replenish the soil and help the crops grow.*

- Prayers of *Praise* - expressing awe at the awesomeness of God. Praise might be motivated by feelings of gratitude or could simply be an appreciation for the general presence of God. We hear prayers of Praise in Psalm 65: *O God, by your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs.*
- Prayers for *insight* - unlike *petitions* and *praises*, prayers for *insight* are less about something we try to articulate, and more about opening ourselves up to careful listening. Seeking insight is freeing ourselves of expectation and opening our hearts and minds and souls to the mystery of God's guidance. Throughout the ages and across religious practices people have found ways to shut out the distractions of the world to allow the holy mystery to fund us: chants, simple repeated choruses, silent retreats, spirit quests, fasting, even drug assisted in some traditions. Seeking insight is the hope of unstructured, unspoken prayer.

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We long to have a meaningful relationship with holy mystery. Prayer is one of the ways we work at feeding this longing.

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In the reading from Luke, we hear Jesus teach about two contrasting approaches to prayer.

The characters of Jesus parable are intentionally presented as polar opposites: a pious, religious person and a person who collected taxes on behalf of the occupying empire. Jesus' audience would have had pre-judged views of these people based on those simple descriptions.

The Pharisee would be assumed to be respected by the community and in good and right relationship with God. Pharisaic Jews were practical believers: they lived out their faith and worshipped in their local communities; they were active in local synagogues; they were champions of social justice and lived out not only the words of the Torah but also the instructions of the prophets and psalm writers. It is fair to characterize Jesus (himself) as part of the pharisaic tradition.

The tax collector (on the other hand) would be viewed as a sellout: a person who had chosen to collaborate with the Roman authorities, for personal, selfish gain. Tax collectors sacrificed neighbourly relationships for their paycheques. The most successful tax collectors would use strong arm tactics to meet their quota. The Romans would expect that a set amount of taxes be submitted by the collector - whatever they could collect over and above *that* was the collector's to keep.

In a different tax collector story in the gospels (that we're going to look at next week), it implies that some tax collectors cheated their constituents to pad their own pockets.

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So, before Jesus goes into details - the audience would be assuming:

Pharisee, good; Tax Collector, bad.

Then... they pray.

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(eyes up; animated, pointing)

*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.*

*Rev. T. Blaine Gregg*

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(eyes down; beating chest)

*God, I am a sinner; be merciful to me!*

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The contrast could not be more stark and obvious.

The Pharisee believes himself to be beyond reproach -- the very model of faithful living: worthy of praise and admiration and (presumably) reward.

The Tax Collector believes himself to be beyond repair: worthy of blame and humiliation and (presumably) punishment.

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I assume that both believe in God's presence.

The Pharisee brags about himself. It is sort of a prayer of praise, but not praise of God: praise of oneself. The closest the prayer comes to expressing gratitude is to imply -- *thank you God for making me so great*. Does the Pharisee think that God doesn't know any of this?

*That's a good question for all of us - do we think that God is uninformed about our lives, unless we state it clearly in a Prayer?*

Jesus' audience must have wondered what you might be wondering: was this prayer really for God or was it for the Pharisee himself and for anyone else in earshot?

One thing is always true -- open, spoken, public prayers are always as much for a human audience as they are for God.

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The tax collector may even have heard the Pharisee prayerful insult directed his way. It would not have come as a surprise to the tax collector that others would have considered him low and shameful. As I said, it came with the job: an occupational hazard.

We don't know the backstory to this second pray-er. Some influx of humility must have come over the tax collector. Perhaps, it was the pain of a broken relationship caused by his chosen profession. Perhaps it was some guilt that stuck as he extorted taxes from someone whose life was going to made very difficult as a result: did his profit take food out of the mouth of a child.

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You may be familiar with the first line of the 23rd Psalm: *The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want*. Some of my favorite interpretive paraphrases of that sentiment are:

- *The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I need.*
- *The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I have.*

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When I hear today's two-prayer parable, I imagine that the tax collector has run out of options for support and God is all that is left.

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*The Lord is my shepherd. There is no one else.*

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The Pharisee presumes that God is with him because of his faithful actions.

The Tax Collector presumes that God is as ashamed with him as he is because of his selfish actions.

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In the midst of these extremes, we are invited to ponder: where is God? With the Pharisee? With the tax collector? With both? With neither?

*Rev. T. Blaine Gregg*

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Like the parable we heard last week: that of *the persistent widow and the unjust judge*, Luke introduces today's parable with an editorial comment about what the context. Verse 9 (today) says that there were some in Jesus' audience who were a bit like the Pharisee in the story, *who trusted in themselves and regarded others with contempt*. And like last week's story, it was the underdog who received justice in the end.

*I tell you, this [tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the other.*

It was an honest humility that separated these two visitors to the temple.

The pharisee saw no need for personal growth and only desired God's agreement on how righteous he was... and let's be honest, he wanted the others in the temple to view him as righteous and upstanding.

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The tax collector saw ample need for personal growth.

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The pharisee did not need God at to be able to compare himself to others, but this focus on selfish status actually kept the pharisee from recognizing God, even at the temple.

In humility, the tax collector found an end to shame and a divine love that accompanied him beyond the temple.

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The pharisee's attitude seems to be that he has earned God's favour through the actions of fasting and tithing, and that the tax collector is outside of God's favour because of his self-serving actions. What the pharisee is unable to see is how central his selfishness is to his approach to God.

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I suspect that the pharisee sees God as what I call a *vending machine god* -- that God can be manipulated by us. If we insert the right payment and push the buttons in the right order, we can get God to give us what we want.

This approach takes the life out of a living god.

It makes god nothing more than an algorithm who once we know the program, we can control.

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This attitude is actually quite common.

*If I pray hard enough, with the right words, maybe supplemented with the right church attendance, or charitable giving or service, God will reward me.*

Those who espouse this attitude are also often prone to explaining away the misfortune of others as a lack of proper faith on their part. *I guess that you just didn't pray hard enough.*

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I simply **refuse to believe** that God has an ego in need of such rubbing. Like CS Lewis, I don't believe that prayer changes God; but prayerfulness can change me.

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For prayer to have life changing power, I believe it needs to be founded in humble honesty, and an open soul.

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For us to be honest before God, we need to be honest with ourselves. In that environment, human hearts can find themselves touching the heart of God.

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*Rev. T. Blaine Gregg*

The tax collector laid bare the depth of his heart.

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The pharisee was so caught up in his own self-adoration that his heart was inaccessible.

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The pharisee left the temple unchanged.

The tax collector went home, changed forever.

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When we pray... let's have an honest conversation with our God -- not to inform God, or manipulate God into doing our will -- but to vulnerably welcome God as a companion on the journey of our day, our life.

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And like the ancient mystics, let us allow for agenda-less silence -- to allow the space between us and God to become thin.

For it is in such times and places, that we might find clarity and insight. It is then that - in holy mystery - we might know God's voice.

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Let us pray:

We praise you, God, for the mystery of your presence. We are in awe of moments of clarity and insight. May it always be so. Amen.

#508VU "Just As I Am"