

“Practicing the Faith”

Luke 18:9-14

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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Thank God I'm not like those others! That really is no way to start a sermon, is it? It's really no way to start a prayer, either; although that is more or less what the first man in Jesus' story today says. Thanks be to God that I am not a sinner like these others. Thank God that I am not like those others. People like—well, you know who I mean, God.

Luke introduces this particular parable by saying that Jesus had a little something to say to those who thought of themselves as righteous—who trusted in themselves as righteous—and who regarded those others with contempt. James Baldwin famously said that we ought to fear more than any others those who consider themselves to be wholly righteous, without fault. Because, he said, they can never be questioned, never be challenged, never be wrong.

So with this Lukan intro, this introduction which serves to make sure we fully understand the moral before he even starts, Jesus tell this story. Two men are praying in the temple in Jerusalem—by far the holiest of places in the faith life of the people of Israel. Yes, he describes one of them as a Pharisee and one as a Tax Collector, but let's set that aside for the moment, since each of those descriptions come with a whole lot of baggage and can actually distract from Jesus' main point. Let's just concentrate on this point: two men went up to the temple to pray. One of these men knew his need for God, humbled himself in God's presence, and honestly confessed his sin. The other's prayers began with this genuine work of gratitude—“Thank God I'm not like those others”—and then continued on with what ends up being more like a résumé of his religious accomplishments—as if God needed reminding all the things he had achieved in his life. And while the text doesn't say it, I sort of imagine him returning back to the beginning of his prayer, like some sort of self-righteous refrain, thanking God once again that he is not a sinner like the rest of those people.

And Jesus, in a slightly different tone than that of Luke in the introduction, says this: all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. Now he seems to mean this in all sorts of ways, as a general pronouncement, over against those who have such confidence in their own righteousness while holding others in such great contempt. At the same time, Jesus reminds us specifically that prayer—the faith practice of communication with God—ought to be a time of humility, of honesty, of vulnerability.

Prayer, of course, is one of several faith practices that we hold up here at CTK, as well as in the larger context of the Lutheran movement and the Christian Church. It is one of the actions we promise to undertake at the time of our baptism, one of the outward signs of the inward activity that takes place as a result of our being named and claimed as people of God, as we respond to Christ's saving grace, and put our faith into action.

I think I've told some of you this story before in another context, but talking about the practice of our faith makes me think of a story I was told by Evangelist Oumar Diallo over 15 years ago, as part of my orientation just after our arrival as missionaries in Senegal. Apparently, in the run up to Senegalese elections in the year 2000, there was a fair amount of curiosity about the wife of one of the candidates, as she was a white woman from France. In particular, folks were curious about her religion. In an interview, Madame Wade described herself as a "non-practicing Catholic." To which my friend Oumar commented the he loved that answer, and was going to follow her example. From now on, he said, I'm going to introduce myself as non-practicing soccer player, or maybe a non-practicing guitarist, since that makes about as much sense as someone being a non-practicing Christian. His point, of course, was that the way you ARE a soccer-player or a guitarist or even a Christian was by putting it into practice.

Today, as we celebrate our Liberian partnership, we are blessed to receive the witness of a faith community that puts their faith into practice. The Believer Bible

Chapel, in the capital city of Monrovia, is a faith community that has been putting its faith into practice, and inviting us to do the same. After years of Civil War, a pandemic of HIV and AIDS, Liberia, was more recently affected by Ebola. In the face of this hardship, The Believer Bible Chapel—a small congregation near Monrovia—began to recognize that education is the hope for Liberia's future. Living out their faith in Jesus Christ, they established a school that now serves 168 students, many of whom are orphans, either from the war, AIDS, or Ebola.

We here at Christ the King have been with this congregation since its founding pastor founder and one of our members, Esther Nyekan, worshiped together in a refugee camp in the neighboring country of Ghana during the civil war. Esther and her husband, Victor, immigrated to the United States and are now members of CTK. Pastor Prince returned to Liberia and founded the congregation.

Thanks to this family connection, CTK has partnered with Believer Bible Chapel and its school since 2009. We have regularly purchased rice and sent school supplies for the students. We have also helped to purchase roofing materials for the church building and supplies during the Ebola crisis. We've also contributed through grants from the CTK Foundation and offerings as part of the most recent capital campaign, as well as on-going benevolence offerings through our Unified Ministry Budget. See, the work of Liberian Partners is an important component of our collective mission and ministry. Through our offerings, as one of the ways we practice our faith individually and collectively we are able to continue this partnership.

This is one of the many faith practices we try to encourage among us here at CTK. Gathering round Word and Sacrament, Growing and deepening our faith through worship, the study of the scripture, an open conversations among both the faithful and seekers. Giving of our selves, our time, our energy, and our

financial resources—regularly, generously, even sacrificially, urging us all to increase in our giving toward and maybe even beyond tithing.

Which brings us, interestingly enough, back to the two men in our gospel story today. You could argue that that first man was actually a pretty good example of putting his faith into action—someone who practiced his faith. Assuming that he actually did all the things he says he did, he was actually a model of putting his faith into practice. He tithed, giving a full ten percent of his income to the temple for its ministry, a generous offering by anyone's measure. We can imagine, that he was a frequent visitor to the temple, that he worshipped regularly, and prayed often. He fasted—showing a depth of spiritual commitment not shared by all the faithful. We can accept that he did all these things, and truly, we have no reason to believe he committed any of the sins he mentions others committing. It was the practice of his prayer that Jesus called into question. His prayer was more about him—his accomplishments, his piety, his perceived worth, not about his need for God, his honest confessing of the sins he HAD committed, nor any sense of true repentance. He thought these practices would save him, and make him somehow better than those others.

Meanwhile, the other man knew his need for God, humbled himself in God's presence, and honestly confessed his sin. He was vulnerable before God, relying on God's goodness and mercy to make things right between him and God. We could imagine that as he became aware of God's graciousness. As we put our faith into practice, as we actively live out our walk with God, whether in our heartfelt worship, in our loving service, in our generous giving, or in our authentic and vulnerable prayer, may we also strive to humble ourselves, to be completely honest before God, and to acknowledge that it is God's movement towards us in Jesus Christ, and not our own accomplishments that justify us, that make us right, that declare us righteous before God. Amen.