

Sermon October 23, 2022 Morning Prayer

Preacher: Julian Sheffield

Luke 18:9-14

Canticle C, The Song of Hannah, 1 Sam 2:1-8 (EOW)

Pharisees get a really bad rap in historic interpretations of the New Testament, to the extent that the word Pharisee has become synonymous with hypocrite. But Pharisees were just one of the groups of religious professionals of Second Temple Judaism, and like religious professionals of any time or place including our own, some of them had great integrity and some – didn't. Nicodemus and Paul were Pharisees, and Joseph of Arimathea may well have been. Besides the letters of Paul, readers of the New Testament can find sound Pharisaic teaching in Acts 5, when the Pharisee Gamaliel advises the council to leave the budding Jesus movement alone, because, he says, "If this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—and you may even be found to be fighting against God!" The Pharisees formed the basis of what became Rabbinic Judaism after the fall of the Temple, and assured the continuity of Judaism in a post-Temple world. As religious professionals, the Pharisees were required to maintain certain standards of behavior and ritual observance.

And the Pharisee of today's passage from Luke does all that. This Pharisee is satisfied with what he gives to God. He fasts twice a week, he gives away a full tenth of his income, he fulfills the requirements of the law. He prays by himself in the Temple, apart from the crowds and speaking only for God and himself to hear. He does not puff himself up before others. He checks off the list of required righteous observances. He attributes to God his ability to do these things. And he is satisfied with his performance. He sees no need to cast himself in the role of the worthless servant we heard about a few weeks ago. He only makes one mistake; he has a second list, a list of the bad things that other people

do, and he checks off all those bad things he doesn't do. Like the people to whom Jesus addresses this story, he steadfastly believes himself better than others, even if he attributes that to God. And there's the problem, because those who believe themselves to be more worthy than others start treating others as less worthy than themselves. It becomes too easy for the self-consciously religious person to treat others with contempt rather than compassion.

Now the tax collector was one of a class of famously hated people. Tax collectors, like lawyers, have always been on the receiving end of opprobrium and bad jokes about getting into heaven. But tax collectors for Rome weren't like the IRS, drawing a regular salary and applying a set of publicly available regulations and formulas. For one thing, they were the agents of the hated conqueror, taking from their own people the money needed to keep the Empire running and the people in subjugation. Second, they weren't supervised, but pretty free to collect the amount they were contracted for by whatever means they could, as much as they could. Third, they often collected more than required, to enrich themselves and secure better contracts by reason of their zeal. We see all that in the story of Zacchaeus later in Luke 19. But the cost was heavy for any who took their Jewish identity and community seriously. They were excluded from some synagogues, and considered social outcasts. If you were a tax collector, it was either because you cared more about being rich than being part of your community, or because you were completely unable to find any other kind of work to support yourself.

Our tax collector today was most likely the latter. He was a despised member of his community doing a hated job. And yet, he wants to be right with God. He knows he is the subject of condemnation by religious professionals and pretty much everyone else, but he still holds to his relationship with God and his belief in God's mercy. He stands afar off, because he is palpably unwelcome in this holy place among these righteous people. They do not welcome him, but he

knows his need and he trusts that God will welcome him. We can't know if this tax collector was one of those who did the job as honestly as possible, and suffered unjustly from the opprobrium of others, or whether he was in fact a sleazeball. All we know is that he believed he was unworthy, and threw himself on the mercy of God.

And Jesus makes it clear that the tax collector received the mercy of God.

Here we have two models of people praying in our reading from Luke. But we have a third model in the Canticle, the Song of Hannah, from First Samuel. And the song of Hannah shows exactly how the exalted will be humbled and the humble will be exalted.

So let's look at the backstory of Hannah.

Hannah was a childless woman during the time of the Judges before there were kings in Israel and before there was any temple in Jerusalem. Her husband Elkanah had two wives, herself and a woman named Peninnah, who had sons and daughters by Elkanah. And Elkanah did not scorn Hannah for her childlessness, but gave her double the food allowance he gave to Peninnah and her children, because he loved Hannah so much. This predictably did not make for happy relations between the two wives, and Peninnah scorned Hannah and made her life miserable. Hannah wept continuously and stopped eating. Elkanah couldn't understand why Hannah was so miserable, and tried to comfort her by saying he should be worth more to her than many sons.

That went over really well.

So one day the family was worshipping at the tabernacle at Shiloh, where Eli the priest was. And as was her custom, Hannah went off by herself and prayed earnestly from her heart for a son, and promised to dedicate that son to God if her prayer was granted. She was praying by moving her lips but making no sound. She probably didn't want to be overheard by Peninnah and mocked afterwards. But Eli the priest thought she was drunk and came over and

chastised her. And she told Eli that no, she hadn't had any strong wine, but her heart was deeply troubled and she was in great distress and she was pouring it out to God. And Eli said, "May the Lord grant your prayer."

Let's pause here, and leave Hannah praying while we take a little excursion into a later time, returning to the first century of the common era. The early rabbis – the Pharisees of the latter part of first century – take this prayer of Hannah as the correct ritual for the basic daily prayer of the observant Jew, called the *Amidah*, which is recited three times a day. Hannah is specifically identified in the rabbis' writings as the source for this ritual pattern. The prayer must be said standing, because Hannah was standing to pray; it must be said with intent, because Hannah said it from her heart; it must be said with the lips, but not so as anyone but God and the self can hear it, because so did Hannah pray. It is profoundly moving, to me, that the behavior of one desperate childless woman became the ritual actions for thrice-daily prayer of all observant Jews everywhere for millennia. And it was Gamaliel II, grandson of Gamaliel the Pharisee we met in Acts, who codified this as normative for Jewish worship after the destruction of the Temple, down to this day.

Hannah had no idea what future life her prayer would have.

And the family went home and Elkanah loved Hannah and she conceived a son. And she called the son Samuel, and explained to Elkanah that she had promised the child to God. And Elkanah honored her promise to God, and supported it. And when the child was weaned, Hannah took him back to Shiloh, to the house of the Lord there and to Eli, and gave him to the Lord forever.

And having prayed fervently to the Lord for the one thing she most wanted in life, a son; having received from the Lord the one thing she most desired, a son; Hannah returned that gift entire, that son, to the Lord, forever. And when she had done that, she did not congratulate herself for her righteousness. She did

not excoriate herself for her worthlessness. No. When she had given back to the Lord the greatest gift he had given her, what did she do? She broke into song:
My heart exults in the LORD;

my strength is exalted in my God.

My mouth derides my enemies,

because I rejoice in your victory.

There is no Holy One like the LORD,

no one besides you;

there is no Rock like our God. *1 Sam 2:1-2 (NRSV)*

And Hannah went on to bear more children, and the Rabbis conjecture how things worked out between Hannah and Peninnah. It was a bit rocky, but eventually they were reconciled, and stood before God in prayer together.

Yes, as Jesus promised, those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. But in the end, both the humbled and the exalted will exult in the Lord, and we will stand together before God, our strength and our Rock.

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