

Flourish in Faith *Stewardship Narrative Series*

Proper 25 - Luke 18:9-14

Sunday, October 27, 2013

*God, I thank you that I am not like other people...
I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income*



What if we were all like this Pharisee? Perhaps the annual financial campaign would produce many more pledges and far less anxiety. The Pharisee tithes and fasts as he is expected to do. Case closed...or maybe not. He seems to use his giving to distinguish himself from others, rather than to draw closer to God and neighbor. And isn't drawing closer to God and to each other the reason we are here in the first place?

The Pharisee tells us what he is not. Not a thief — check. Not a rogue — check. Not an adulterer — check. And he is surely not like “this tax collector” praying only footsteps away. The Pharisee is crystal clear about anything and everything that he is not, but does he know who he is? Though tithing and fasting are central to how he views himself, we are left to wonder what motivates these practices. Power? Privilege? Prestige? Piety? While paying attention to the sins of others, are the Pharisee's prayers and his practices really focused on God, the Source of life and giver of all good gifts?

To be trustworthy stewards of our blessings requires that we seek a sense of who we are before God, the better to understand whom God calls us to become. Unfortunately, honest self-evaluation can be painful. Witness the tax collector: his shame forces him to avert his gaze and beat his breast. However, even more powerful than his shame is his trust in God's mercy. His plea, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” opens him to the possibility of transformation through the benevolence of God. On the other hand, the Pharisee's prayer leaves little room for growth. He has everything figured out, in contrast to all those thieves and rogues he sees around him. The tax collector's prayer leaves room for new life.

Our individual and communal finances may sometimes cause us to beat our breasts, whether out of frustration, worry, shame or some other emotion. Many of us, perhaps like the Pharisee, may want to put our best foot forward by suppressing our deepest feelings and avoiding a critical examination of who we are, where we are, and to whom we belong. Others of us may take the tax collector's example way too far, beating ourselves up until we are sore with shame.

God loves us wherever we are but may not want us to stay there. With God's help, we can avoid the extremes of self-righteousness and self-deprecation. We can candidly acknowledge all that we are while trusting in God's grace to strengthen us and help us to flourish. As we give to our congregations, may God deliver us from our anxieties and, in turn, give us new life.



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Reflection Questions

- What are the various motivations for giving?
- Is it easy to fall into pride and or into shame about giving?
- How do judgment of others and judgment of self get in the way of receiving God's grace?

