

The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost/October 28, 2007
Annual Council Sunday
A Sermon for Parishes of the Diocese of Nebraska
The Rt. Rev. Joe G. Burnett, Bishop

Overhearing the Gospel
Luke 18:9-14

Grace and peace to you from God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord! As we gather for this 140th Annual Council in Kearney, I am pleased to bring you words of greeting and of challenge, not only about today's gospel lesson, but also about the great challenges and opportunities that lie before us in the Diocese of Nebraska.

Two men go up to the temple to pray. One, a Pharisee, brags about his holy life. The other, a tax collector, begs for mercy, acknowledging his sinfulness. It's a simple story, with a clear moral. Or is it?

Some years ago, a noted biblical scholar and preacher named Fred Craddock wrote a book called *Overhearing the Gospel*. He said that many of us have become so familiar with some of the stories in the bible that we think we know all about them. We have *over*-heard them to the point that we begin to take them for granted, and thus miss their sometimes very pointed message. He says that what we need is a fresh telling of these stories, so that we can *overhear* them, as if we were just hearing them for the first time; as if we were hearing breaking news, or just catching some whispered gossip, or just learning a precious secret.

I wonder if we don't also need to hear again the good news of what is happening all around us in our diocese, because perhaps we have come to take somewhat for granted the good things that God is doing in and through individual parishes and persons all around Nebraska.

So this morning I invite you to come with me into this bible story temple. Watch with me as these two characters stand before God and pray their prayers. Let's see if we can *overhear* something startling or unexpected. Let's see if there's something about this seemingly simple gospel lesson that can surprise us, and find new application in our lives, and in the ongoing ministry and mission of our diocese.

To do this, let me pose a few unusual questions. The first is this: When we read this story, "*Why aren't we uncomfortable?*" Let me explain. Luke says that Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

Most of us are hard-wired with pretty accurate detectors for the self-righteous. We can sniff out the "holier than thou" attitude. We can spot smug religiosity. We can pick out the Pharisee in the crowd every time. The trouble is, our radar for pharisaic self-righteousness seems to work on everyone *except ourselves*.

So I think this parable ought to make us quite uncomfortable every time we hear it. It should remind us that we in the church can often be so prone to hide our true selves behind a facade of

uprightness and well-doing. We tend to cover our weaknesses and shortcomings with religious words—words that never take flesh in our daily lives.

I ask you—how effectively have you and your congregation undertaken to reach out and respond to the hopes and yearnings, the needs and opportunities, which are present in your particular community? How often and how adequately do you and your parish leaders move beyond “praying with words” to praying in action. I urge you anew to take stock of the many opportunities on a diocesan level to equip your parish for ministry and mission, and take advantage of the rich harvest that is all around us, but so often overlooked.

So here’s another question: “*Why the temple?*” Have you ever noticed how many of Jesus’ conversations, teaching and ministry take place in and around the temple? I once heard a priest say in a sermon dedicating a beautiful new chapel that “God doesn’t need a church building, but we do.” How true it is. Something in us has always cried out for a place, a sacred space, in which to pray and worship.

I recall watching a few years ago the funeral service of former President Ronald Reagan, which took place at the Washington National Cathedral. You may also recall the interfaith prayer service held in that same place, shortly after the tragic events of September 11. As I watched on both occasions the diverse religious and political leaders gather and pray in that place, I gave thanks for that building, which is also the cathedral for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington.

The groundbreaking for that cathedral took place at the beginning of the 20th century, but construction was halted many times over the years due to shortage of funds, and other local and national circumstances. It was not finally completed until the late 1980's.

Today, because of the prevailing sense that such buildings are too large and too expensive, my guess is that this project would never make it to groundbreaking. But have you ever stopped to think, where would our nation gather for prayer without that stunning sacred place? Indeed, can you imagine your own religious journey without the hallowed places and spaces that have housed your ritual and liturgical life?

As I travel around Nebraska I see multiple situations where there is a pressing need for good old fashioned bricks and mortar. Not every congregation is growing numerically, to be sure, but there are many who are blessed with extraordinary opportunities because of expanding demographics. I am so very pleased that this past year we have seen the completion and dedication of a new church for St. Martha’s Papillion. I also am pleased to report that we continue to seek ways to secure new property, and to assist congregations needing to expand their facilities to meet the growing challenge of an increasing population. That’s just one of the many things that make the success of our Alleluia Fund so important.

The next question is a bit more unusual: “*Where are the women?*” To be more specific, “Where are the Pharisee’s and the tax collector’s wives?” Now you’re probably wondering, why should we ask that question? How do we even know they were married, for goodness sake? Well, of course, we don’t. But chances are they were.

And so I wonder if the women who are listening to this message here this morning would rather have been married to the unctuous Pharisee, or to the crooked but self-confessing tax collector? The fact is that neither of them would have offered you much advantage. In either case, chances are that you would be at home, or at the well drawing water, or scrubbing pots, or at the market. You would be doing what women *did* then—taking care of the necessities of life, raising the children, eking out a meager existence.

In *no* case would you have been at prayer in the temple, because religion then centered in the dual hierarchy of priesthood and patriarchy. If women had any religious life at all, it revolved around their husbands or fathers. The only religious transactions that mattered at all in the culture Jesus lived and taught in were those of the men.

We take for granted that this is no longer the case. And yet our country's ongoing struggle against terrorism, however we may feel about it, has made us acutely aware of how many of the world's women are *still* living in the shadows of men, trying to manage in sometimes violent and abusive circumstances. Many of them still function at near-primitive levels, carrying jars for miles to draw water, while their "Pharisees" and "tax collectors" use sophisticated weapons and fight in holy wars.

And in our own society, we are constantly reminded of the rise of domestic violence, and the challenges presented by those who are its primary victims—women and children.

Even in our recent disputes in the Anglican communion, it is sad but true to point out how few of the provinces of our global church provide for leadership roles for women, whether ordained or not.

So we must ask the question, "Where are the women?" to remind us of these invisible women. Their absence from the story should remind us of countless women today who yet live without justice, without basic human rights, without leisure to pray, and—in the case of some in our own ecclesiastical arena—without the recognition of their God-given eligibility for ordained service. And this should give us even more incentive to participate fully in the Episcopal Church's support of the Millennium Development Goals, which, among other things, provide for ongoing investment in the education and economic development of all who are downtrodden, but especially women and children.

Well, the final question is simply this: "*What's the point? What's the point of this story of the uppity Pharisee and the penitent tax collector?*"

The Pharisee leaves the temple with a hardened heart. So we are reminded that there is nothing we can ever do or say to put ourselves right with God. Like the Pharisee, most of us can honestly say that we have love for God. But our love of God can so easily be twisted into a disguise that protects our vulnerable self.

That is why the tax collector's utter defenselessness wins the day. He has no righteousness of his own. He must depend *totally* on God's generosity. He comes to know, like we all someday must, that only God's heart is wide and inclusive enough to heal our own.

Someone has said that the haughty Pharisee “takes his stand on a life God cannot use,” because it is a false life, while the lowly tax collector “rests his case on a death God can use,” because his posture is that of dying to self. In so doing the tax collector puts himself precisely in the place where he can be reached and redeemed by a God who raises the dead to new life.

My brothers and sisters, we too are called to rest our case on a death God can use. Or, as St. Paul put it in Romans chapter 5, verse 8: “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” When we know that our lives are pure gift, and that in spite of all our best efforts, we depend solely on God’s grace, we will continue to experience anew the *resurrection to new life*.

Today in our closing Council Eucharist, we will join together in renewing our Baptismal Covenant. Whenever we make these promises we are rededicating ourselves, as individuals and as a church, to the selfless service of a suffering Lord. Our promises are not a pretense to false religiosity, but an affirmation of our intention to enter more deeply into the life of Christ

Today I invite you one and all into the temple of his heart, where his gracious welcome for the honest sinner always abounds, and where his mercy abides for ever.