What was up with that annoying Pharisee?
an Ignatian-inspired sermon by John Bellaimey
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St. John's Episcopal Church, Linden Hills (Minneapolis)

Apparently, God likes the most depressing prayers.

Last week, we heard about the corrupt judge, whose rulings could be bought. and how *even he* would still listen to a very persistent widow who bothers him day after day. The point was: keep praying.

Jesus exaggerated in order to make a point: yes, the kind of judge you have matters, but so does your own dogged persistence. This morning we just heard Jesus' next story:

OK, picture this: two guys in church, there's no service going on, and they were praying out loud, one bragging about how religious he was, and how good he was compared to Those Other People. Especially that Tax Collector over there.

Both guys in the story were apparently telling the truth. The first guy serves on a bunch of church committees, does dishes in the kitchen, gives ten percent to the church and brags about it, and when the capital campaign comes along he's gonna give. Bigly. And just to put a sting in the story, Jesus makes this person a Pharisee, like his own teachers back home.

As for the bad guy, we don't know if he was religious, but he knows God's judging him, and he needs a lot of mercy. The verdict will be guilty, for sure. He knows that a fair punishment would be something like 1. Repay all the bribes you took, 2. Take a beating for every beating you had your goons deliver. 3. Find places to live for all the folks you put into bankruptcy. And so on. So he stands at the back. True, tax collectors were often the richest guys in town. But it was mostly dirty money, like drug crypto. Any time Jesus put a tax collector in his stories, it was a guy who takes advantage of his power.

This story is about how to pray, and why you should. Now I am not great at always saying grace or my morning prayers. But one of my favorite ways to pray is what I am doing right now. Imagining what it's like in a Biblical story, getting to know the characters, and seeing what comes up from the quiet places inside myself. I follow the advice of Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst who taught that we should pay attention to our unconscious. I remember my dreams sometimes, and think about what my mind could be trying to sort out.

My wife and I just returned from grandparenting in London. Forest, who is three years old, knows that I like to dig into stories and imagine what else is going on. He asks me to tell 'Peter and the Wolf' over and over, telling it long and short, telling it in the voice of the duck who got swallowed by the wolf; or telling it as the anxious grandfather [bassoon theme] Peter ignores him and goes into the woods. The same grandson asks Lynnell to be a mommy whale and he can be the baby. Or to be Shirley the cow at the farm he visits. Or he wants my fingers to be the visitors to the farm and he will be Shirley.

Imagining stories is fun but tiring after awhile, and I have to eventually tell him we're done. But he knows I love improvising. So the prayer method I'm recommending this morning is Biblical improv, silent contemplation or active journaling.

I learned about it in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, which I was lucky enough to discover on a retreat as a high school junior in Detroit. Ignatius lays out a method for contemplative prayer that I've always loved and often used, including in 25 years of Childrens' Chapel at St John's. It's based on the ancient *Lectio divina*. Godly reading. Reading to divine what something brings up for you. Paying attention to the messages deep in your soul.

In recent years at church meetings I've found *Lectio* often used as the label for a cringy and fast warmup exercise where people toss out single words they heard in the passage and then the leader tells us we have to move on.

Instead, the German filmmaker Fr. Christof Wolf, S.J. compares it to making a movie in your mind :

> Ignatius brings us actively into the scene. I should ask for nothing but
> for the gift of feeling the scene. Real empathy with it involves my emotions and
> has the potential to change me and give me new perspectives. Once the stage setting
> or film location is ready, I consider who is there to see. What are the actors saying?
> What especially speaks to me? After the words comes the action....
> the inner film, the main part of the exercise. Like a director or cameraman,
> I shape my own film. I let myself speak with the persons, interact with them,
> grasp them, touch them, or just let myself observe them. Ignatius's recommen-
> dation to "reflect on myself" means that I let my emotions really encounter the
> story, which can make me laugh or cry. And in spite of precise planning, surprises
> keep coming up, just as in a real filming where the story might get a completely
> new ending.

I love how Ignatius, a highly disciplined former soldier, nevertheless encourages us to enter the emotional world and let the characters connect with parts of myself that I didn't maybe know. Ignatius called it "praying with all our senses." Give it enough time for the feelings to develop, not just the action. Sit with it.

So to pray with this parable of the two guys in the Temple, try imagining their mornings. Why did they go to the Temple? What was the big deal? What happened to them on the way there? Jesus doesn't tell us anything about the scene. So we can imagine. It's called *midrash* in Judaism.

This kind of contemplation works for me. It's interesting. It puts me in touch with feelings inside me that I might not have been aware of. My guilt and my pride and my insecurity. My impatience and my calmness. My silliness and my seriousness. All these are a part of my psyche. My soul. My self, which the Buddhists and Jesus remind us is not separate from God, though we keep forgetting. The Holy Spirit is doing things in you, but not necessarily like some repair person or surgeon. She *is* you, says Carl Jung. He even had a saying on his wall, *Bidden or unbidden, God is present.*

So imagine these two fellows on their way to the Temple. I'm going to give you a few minutes to try it.

OK, now imagine being a thankful Pharisee, a basically good person, pretty sure we'll be successful and even get to heaven. Or the wretched Tax Collector, asking for mercy and afraid he doesn't deserve it. I won't be asking you to share afterward. Just contemplate quietly now. Maybe you will learn something about yourself, or about someone you love. Maybe not. But sitting quietly in church is kind of sweet!

Why was he dressed like that?
How did he enter the Temple and choose to stand where he did?
How did he regard himself, compared to the few others there?
Why was he so emotional?
What was his family like?
When he left home, what was happening? Who was there? What was the mood?
If he had had breakfast, what was it like?
What was his walk to the Temple like that morning? Did he see friends? Did he see anything disgusting, lovely, or scary?

That's probably enough. So take three minutes to just picture this fellow human being.

[3 minutes]

Let us pray: God, help us to find new ways to pray. Like the Pharisee, let us be thankful but in the right way. Like him, let us resolve to do the right things in life, to be good members of our communities, and to care for the people around us, but not for selfish reasons. And like the Tax Collector, help us be honest about how our lives are messy, and about how we haven't done what needs to be done about the mess. But instead of only gratitude or only lament, God please help us see your grace, even in the tiniest moments.

Amen.

https://www.spiritual-exercises.org/assets/the_spiritual_exercises_of_loyola.pdf

Christof Wolf, S.J. *Der Augenblick ist für mich* (*The Moment Is For Me*) © 2021 by Loyola Productions Munich GmbH, Translation: Daniel Jamros, S.J.