

## **“Thank God!”**

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Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

One of Vincent van Gogh paintings features a mass of irises. The canvas is a riot of color, vibrant as if the color saturation bar was moved way to the right. Irises of blues and purples, strappy leaves in green, blue and yellow. Orange-red soil. Yet with one lone white flower straight and tall to one side.

I look at that single white blossom and I wonder, does it represent the self-assured person, standing tall, who is praying so diligently, thankful that he is not like to others around him? Or does it reflect the one who, so aware of his own unworthiness, cannot even look up as he prays?

Gazing at this painting, I think about today’s lesson and wonder about these two characters that Jesus describes. And since it’s our theme for this season of Advent, I wonder which one most needs a savior. If I asked you that question, at least one voice would answer, “Both.”

It’s true that Jesus tells the story and then explains it to his listeners. But when we have listened to and read enough of Jesus’ teachings, we come to understand that there are layers of meaning in each lesson. Today’s is no exception.

Two people stand and pray. One is so confident of his own goodness, so sure of himself that he leaves little room for God to do God’s great thing in his life. He apparently needs nothing, so he asks nothing of God. To have no need sounds wonderful. Yet, his well-ordered, comfortable life leaves little room for God to work through him. This man needs a savior to help him to realize that while his life may be good, it can be so much better when he invites God to be a part of his story.

The second man, who stands at a distance begging for God’s mercy, is so sure of his own unworthiness that the only way he will be able to lift his head is by accepting God’s grace. He may be successful at work or at home, yet he knows that on his own he has nothing to recommend him before God.

This man needs a savior to guide his life and to help him accept that God’s grace and love is not based on his own merits – or lack of them. God loves him because, to put it simply, love is part of God’s nature. In the changing seasons of our lives, most of us have spent time as each of these two men.

Sometimes we are uncertain. We look around us and we see the world's brokenness. So much is wrong. So many people are hurting or hungry. So many struggle with intolerance and injustice. Good people face terrible accusations while others commit heinous acts without penalty. Even without feeling that we are particularly good or bad, we stand, like that white iris, surveying all around us and cry out, "God, show us your mercy!"

Alternately, our uncertainty may come from our knowledge that we have not been living as God would have us live. We can get so busy – meeting deadlines, making payments, getting everyone where they need to be – that we forget that God intends a bigger life for us. Without ever cheating or stealing from anyone else, we can cheat ourselves of the life God longs for us to live. This is not a dilemma we can solve on our own. Like the man in Jesus' story, we need to throw ourselves on God's mercy.

In other seasons of our lives, we may be confident that we have been living as God would have us live. Like that white iris, we stand apart from the others around us by the ways we care for the needs of people in our communities, by our language and attitudes, by our giving to and activity in the church. We feel confident that we are following Christ's example and take refuge in this knowledge. Life may be hard; bad things still happen but we hold onto our sense that in this, at least, we are doing well.

When we live as Jesus calls us to live, we may experience a spiritual high. With the expansive presence of God as Spirit within us, our awareness is heightened. We are fuller, better versions of ourselves. And it feels good. Still... we need to watch out, for when we depend on our own resources – even to do Christ's bidding – we tend *not* to depend on God. Our lives *may* be very good, but they will never be as good, as complete, as they can be when we open ourselves and allow God to work through our lives, molding and shaping us, when we invite God into an active, ongoing relationship with us. As in other healthy relationships, our connection with God deepens over time, both mellowing and strengthening all that makes us who we are, as the One who is beyond all else leads us to be our best selves.

We all need a savior. It can be easier to depend upon our God when the path we tread is rocky or littered with obstacles, yet we need God just as surely when the sun shines brightly and all things are good.

Advent has long been hailed as a time of anticipation, but like the season of Lent which comes before Easter, it's also a good time for self-examination, asking ourselves things like: Am I making time to pray regularly? What can I shift in my day to spend more time simply being aware of God and what God would have me notice?

Our winter breakthrough prayer might be a good springboard to those moments with the holy. Whether you pray it at 9:03 A.M. or P.M. or anytime in between, let this be a kairos moment, as you step for an instant beyond clocks, calendars and human expectations to rest in God embrace.

Life is not going to get any easier during these four weeks before Christmas. The world is not going to suddenly make more sense. Some people will act kinder; that does happen, maybe even to you. The trick, if there's a trick, is to let God effect a long-lasting change within us, to allow God to reshape our attitudes so that in all seasons of our lives, God through Christ is our center – whether we're lost in the weeds of busyness, sunk in the mires of loneliness and loss, or sailing the thermals during our joyous, best days.

This is God's hope for us.

May it be so.

Would you pray with me?

Holy God, thank you that in all situations, in every moment, you are present with us. Thank you that through Christ our savior, we have a better understanding of what you want for us – relationships, companionship, good work, joy and hope and love. Thank you. Amen.