

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 24, 2010, dedicated to our newest members who join today, and to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim children I met on my journey from Africa, Europe and Asia, and always to the glory of God!

“The Spirit of Children: God’s Kingdom is Coming”

***II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-22;
Luke 18: 9-17***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Luke’s parable – acted and sung so beautifully this morning – is a story about two men who come to the temple to pray.

One man is a tax collector, a sinner who would have been known as a traitor to his family and his faith. His job was to take what little money the people had through the oppressive power of Rome’s tax collection system. He knew he was doing the wrong thing. In the face of this knowledge, he confesses his sins to God, crying out for mercy. He is repentant (even though there is no implication that he goes home and takes up a new trade). For this, we see him as a humble and honest man.

The other man is a Pharisee, a righteous and observant Jew. Trained as a religious man, he lives his practice of faith.

We know because he tells us. Although he preserves the faith of Moses as closely as he can by following the 613 laws of Moses, his mistake is pointing out his righteousness for others to see. He prays with himself. While he, too, is honest, his honesty leads to self-exaltation.

One Boston cynic once described a preacher's prayer as "the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience." (quote from William Barclay's Commentary on Luke 18:9-14) Like the preacher of Boston, the pharisee of Jerusalem is giving himself a testimonial before God. This is problematic.

The pharisee appears not to be interested in really praying to God. He has gone to the temple of God (once again) to inform God how good he is as opposed to how bad the other guy is! Don't you think God knows both of these "truths?" Don't you think God knew before he even opened his mouth?

Everyone of us is confronted in this passage with the challenge of holiness and the problem of attitude when standing or kneeling before the creator of heaven and earth. Juxtaposed to our pharisaic friend with his eyes open and his voice talking loudly and clearly to God, the tax collector cannot lift his eyes before God. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible says he actually prayed, "O God, be merciful to me – *the sinner.*" It is this heartbroken, self-despising prayer which wins acceptance before God, Jesus tells us. The truth is not one of us can pray to God when we are puffed up with pride. But anyone can pray when heartbroken and confessing sins.

Besides pride getting in the way of prayer, no one who despises others can pray. God is mocked when we lift ourselves above others in prayer. Whenever we say, "*Thank you God, that I am not* (fill in the blank)," we can pretty much guarantee that our prayer is not acceptable before God.

In his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God," 18th century Congregational Light and Preacher Jonathan Edwards talked about God dangling sinners above the fires of

hell like a spider dangling its prey in the spider's web. Edwards, known for his amazing preaching on "grace," offers this graphic (and very memorable) image, not while talking about any certain group of drinkers, or tax collectors or even slave owners, whom he often preached against. Preacher Edwards was talking about church-going folks who believed themselves to be sinless. Edwards was talking to preachers and people of his times who got all puffed up with pride when celebrating their (our) preeminence over others who are not as good as we are. They were like the pharisee and he was not going to let this go unaddressed! Three hundred years later, we still need to beware of ourselves – preacher and people alike.

True prayer comes from setting our lives beside the life of Jesus. When the pharisee speaks, I am certain he fasted as directed, meticulously tithed his material gifts and is, in most ways, "better than most people." But the question is not, "Am I as good as my neighbor?" The question really is, "Am I as Good as God?" Who among us can answer, "Yes?"

Now I must add an historical note to this parable. We dare never use this parable for judgment of others. That is what Adolf Hitler did. In the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler's national socialist theologians (yes, there were men known for this!) used this parable to point out the falseness of Jewish faith. I am not sure how these "theologians" are resting in peace! But that is not for me to judge.

And this passage is not about Jews and Christians. It never has been! This is about pride in prayer and honesty in confession. It is about how we live our lives before God. The same pharisee, having followed all the laws and done so with a humble, contrite heart, would have been blessed in the eyes of the Almighty. Being a good man is not a bad thing. But, being prideful is.

I love the Gospel of Luke and the symmetry of Jesus' teachings. The sequence of Luke's Gospel readings makes me

smile. Luke follows the story of prideful prayer juxtaposed to humble prayer with the story of the children (and their parents) coming to Jesus. Amazing! Without missing a beat, Luke continues, “People kept bringing him even their babies so he could bless them.”

Talk about a transition from pride to humility, from puffed up to brought down to your knees! Wow! Mothers and fathers brought Jesus their babies as was the tradition in Judaism – to bring your child for a blessing from the rabbi!

Parents know Jesus loves the ALL the little children. He especially loves the babies! Can you see Jesus changing a diaper? I can! As the oldest son in a family of five kids, I am sure he changed diapers, babysat and entertained his little brothers and sisters. Everyone agrees, he would have made a great dad! Mothers and fathers saw this in him! His openness, his nature as a storyteller, his kindness, his amazing love and grace, his humor, his humility – everything pointed to someone who loved the kids! Children sensed it too! They wanted to be with Jesus! He was really cool.

Now the disciples aren’t grinchies in this story. They are simply aware that Jesus is always pushed by those who hate him, pulled by those who want him to be in their synagogue teaching and preaching, touched by those who want his healing power. They know he needs a break sometimes. So they are trying to protect him. But Jesus doesn’t need protection from the children. He loves being with the children! They give him strength and energy! “Let them come over to me,” he says!

In the children, everything missing in the previous story is present! Children possess the sense of wonder. They don’t miss the wonderfulness of any moment. They are real! They call it like they see it. Their prayers reflect a sincerity and an honest clarity missing in the prayers we have just witnessed.

Now I often get emails about the prayers of children.

Some of them I don't find believable. But all of them make me smile and laugh. This week, Cori Rowley sent me 16 prayers that were handwritten by children.

I want to share 10 of them with you because Jesus told me to! You say, "What?" That's right! Jesus says, let the children come unto me and do not stop them! I believe he means, let their wonder come unto me! Let their delight come unto me! Let their honesty and sincerity come unto me! Let their trustful beings come unto me! And let their prayers come unto me! So here we go!

Dear God,

I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it. Nan

Dear God,

Please put another holiday between Christmas and Easter. There is nothing good in there now. Ginny

Dear God,

If you watch in Church on Sunday I will show you my new shoes. Mickey D.

Dear God,

If we come back as something please don't let me be Jennifer Horton because I hate her.

Denise

Dear God,

Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother. Larry

Dear God,

We read Thomas Edison made light. But in Sunday School they said you did it. So I bet he stole your idea.

Sincerely,

Donna

*Dear God,
Please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year.
Peter*

*Dear God,
Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayer for was a
puppy.
Joyce*

*Dear God,
In Bible times did they really talk that fancy?
Jennifer*

One of my greatest moments on sabbatical was a Saturday morning at Kibbutz Hannaton, about 10 miles from where Jesus met the little children. I was headed to the synagogue for Shabbat services, walking up the path with Yaniv and his 3-year-old triplets – two sons and a daughter. The boys walked ahead, each holding a hand of their father. Mali and I walked a few steps behind. Mali is very shy and quiet. While her brothers had warmed up to me, she wasn't quite sure about this stranger from a far away land.

As we walked, I simply opened my left-hand beside her. Without making any eye contact, she reached up and slipped her little hand into mine and closed her fingers around my fingers. Together we walked hand in hand to the synagogue. There we would play and pray this Sabbath day because in the hours ahead she and her brothers and their little friends joined me in building blocks, reading picture books and offering heartfelt prayers.

For me, this moment with Mali was true prayer.

When we quietly, humbly connect with God in the silence of our walk of faith, it often draws no attention from anyone except the one with whom we have made ultimate contact. In silence we reach out and connect – hand in hand on the path

of holiness and faith. God knows we need this. We know we need this.

My prayer for you this week is that you reach out quietly and humbly and touch God and be touched by God as simply and beautifully as a Mali reached up and took my hand on a pathway to worship. As you do, I believe the kingdom of God will be revealed to you.

May you carry the spirit and the prayer of Elliott into your week as you go forth today – *Dear God, I even think about you sometimes when I am not praying. Amen.*

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