Response-ability 3

Welcome to the third week of our fall series. To bring you up to speed if you’ve missed the last two weeks, we started off saying as human beings we have freedom to act and react to life. We have the ability to respond to the events that happen to us. And how we choose to do it, how we choose to respond determines in large part the course and quality of our life.

When you look back over the arc your life to date, how you responded to certain situations, certain opportunities certain events have shaped the outcomes. Maybe some opportunity was given and maybe you took full advantage of it and ran that opportunity all the way down the field, and that changed everything.

Or you didn’t…and you regret it. What is true in life is also true in our faith life. God, who created the Universe and is the absolute origin of absolutely everything always takes the initiative in granting his grace and mercy. His gifts are given to us each and every day and it is up to us to take responsibility to acknowledge that. When we do respond, well, that’s called prayer.

So over the last two weeks we have looked at responding to God through prayer. We talked about prayer of thanksgiving. God gives to us, we acknowledge the gift, we say thank you. Last week, we looked at how we respond to God when it feels like we are failing in prayer or as if it seems God is not even listening to us or ignoring us.

And we said in that time it is our responsibility to keep on praying and keep on praying and keep on praying. God may seem silent, prayer may not seem to be making any difference, we may feel like prayer failures but that is precisely when we need to persevere in prayer, we need that conversation.

Extending the conversation is where you develop the relationship God wants with you. Maybe you’ve heard people talk about having a personal relationship with Christ, and you’ve thought, I don’t even know what that means. Well, initially it’s just a conversation.

Today we’re going to dig down deeper into these reflections by turning to a story that Jesus told his friends and followers. Like many of his stories it is a surprising story, it takes a surprising, unlikely turn. Jesus loved stories like that. And it starts like this:

Two men went up to the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee and other was a tax collector. Luke 18.10

Now unless you are a Biblical scholar that might not mean anything at all to you.
But if you were in Jesus’ audience when he told this story, he immediately sets an interesting scenario. The Pharisees were the rabbis or teachers of Jesus’ day. They were also the enforcers and interpreters of the Jewish Law. They themselves proposed to live the law authentically and utterly to the letter of the law...no small thing to do because the law itself, and then their interpretation of it was pretty complicated, so complicated and complex in fact, that the average person, even religious people, couldn’t do it.

And if truth be told, most Pharisees themselves couldn’t do it either (so there was a bit of built in hypocrisy implicit in their very approach). If you saw a Pharisee on the street you would have to step aside, if he came into the room you’d have to give him the place of honor, because the culture is saying he’s not just good, he’s better than you, because he’s right before God, he’s good with God and you’re not.

Tax Collectors on the other hand were at the opposite end of the social spectrum, the worst possible people. Tax collectors were always the wealthiest people in any community and everybody knew theirs was dishonest wealth.

They were despised by average Jews.

And since the community judged them so harshly, people who were tax collectors tended to just give up on the whole religion and God thing and live pretty selfish, hedonistic lives.

So the story is about this churchperson who is all about the rules and laws and the biggest sinner who ever dared to show up at church showing up at church at the same time. Jesus goes on.

_The Pharisee took stood up and spoke this prayer to himself,_

"God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionist, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I tithe my whole income.” Luke 18.11-12

OK, so this is a church person showing up at church and saying:

- OK God, I’m here, a little late but I’m here and I hope you’re happy because it was a huge hassle getting here and that parking lot is insane which means I’m probably going to be late for the Eagles kick-off so I hope you’re happy.
- And yes, I’m putting something into the collection this week, even though last week the pastor really ticked me off.
- And by some miracle I got the kids here too, and I haven’t completely lost it with them this weekend (At least not yet) so I get credit for that.
- And despite some serious temptation, I did _not_ cheat on my wife.
- And I didn’t murder anyone, though I could kill my partner after he lost that deal.
- And I haven’t cheated anybody in my business, at least not anybody that didn’t have it coming to them anyway.
- All in all, I might not be perfect, but I’m not as bad as a lot of people I know, starting with a lot of people in this church right now who are sitting here pretending to be holy. Just look at them.
- Amen.

That’s one approach for sure. Then Jesus describes a different one:

> “But the tax collector, stood off at a distance and would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and prayed, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner!”

Luke 18.13

OK, so this is the hell raising, skirt-chasing wild man on campus who cheats on his girl friend and cheats on his exams and lies to his friends. And one Sunday he actually shows up at church. and he’s holding his head in his hands not out of piety but because he’s so hung over. And here’s his prayer: “God help me.”

Got the picture.

That’s the picture Jesus paints and his audience was probably, yeah, so what’s your point? That’s just what he goes on to tell us:

> I tell you, this man, rather than the other, went home justified.

Luke 18.14

Wait a minute, which man?

This man went home justified.

Luke 18.14

You mean the unchurched heathen? That guy? Yeah, that guy actually left church with a better relationship with God than the perfect church guy. How does that work? Does that mean that we can just do whatever we want and tell God we’re sorry and we’re good as new. Well, a lot of people take that approach, but that is not what the Scripture is teaching.
For me the key to the whole story comes at the beginning, where Luke tells us what

*Jesus told this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else*

(Luke 18.9)

See the church guy approached God convinced of his own righteousness. In other words he was self-righteous. Self-righteous people think that their actions make them not only good but better than others. Rather than using good work and service as a platform for prayer, to look up to God the posture they adapt while doing the right thing, the good and virtuous thing is to look down on everybody else.

Now here’s the problem with that: when you’re looking down on everybody else you cannot possibly be turned up toward God. It is physically impossible.

In fact look at the story, the Bible says:

*The Pharisee took stood up and spoke this prayer to himself,*

(Luke 18.11)

He said the prayer to himself. He wasn’t even praying to God, he was talking to himself. He was just talking to himself. He approached God as if he didn’t need him, the unchurched heathen approached God as if he did.

Here’s the bottom line of the parable and if you get nothing else out of this message today, get this. The effectiveness of your prayer does not depend on your performance. The effectiveness of your prayer does not depend on your performance, but on the condition of your heart.

Yes, you can use the good deeds and virtuous habits that follow from prayer as a very effective platform for deeper and ever more effective prayer, but the effectiveness of your prayer depends on a contrite heart turned toward God. A heart turned toward God that acknowledges God is God and you’re not, and there is nothing you can do to change that.

There is nothing you can do to save yourself or redeem yourself or justify yourself. It’s about a heart that needs God. The effectiveness of your prayer begins with that recognition. That is why the tax collector’s prayer is the very best way to begin prayer.

It’s how we begin prayer here at Mass. Lord have mercy on me a sinner, and glory to you God because you are great.
So today, I want to lay out three possible applications for this message and ask you to choose one. **First**, for those of you who are consistent with prayer, or even in only the early stages of trying to be, I challenge you to look at your own routine and make sure the Pharisees’ prayer isn’t creeping into your prayer.

Examine your heart, consider your motive in coming here today, ask God to remove from your heart any indication that you’re doing it to earn your own way into heaven, or look down on anyone else. For those of you who need to pray the tax collectors prayer, do it, do it here at Mass today.

Acknowledge you need God in your life. If that is you, I just want to give you a chance in your heart to pray like the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me a sinner”

**Third**, whichever group you may be in, I invite you to come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Saturday 3:30-4:30, or by appointment. If you haven’t been there in a long time, this is a great time to go, don’t worry about knowing the prayers. All of us have fallen short of God’s glory, on our own; we have nothing to recommend us to God. Our prayers based on our own performance are worthless.

The good news is that God doesn’t base his answers to our prayer on our performance, but on Jesus’ performance on the cross. It is our responsibility to acknowledge those weaknesses, to own them and confess them so that we can receive the abundant mercies of God.