

Nora Pederberg  
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Osler Mennonite Church

### Prayers of the Unpretentious:

*Sirach 35:12-17; Luke 18:9-14*

Good Morning Everyone,

Today's scripture readings are beautiful stories that perfectly exemplify Mennonite values. Reading them through for the first time, I thought 'wonderful, how nice to preach on some comfortable verses that fit so nicely into what we already believe.' Even our text from Sirach [*SEAR-RACK*], which is a book found in the Catholic edition of the Bible rather than the protestant one we preach from, felt familiar in tone and lifted up values held dear in our faith. They felt safe. In the sneaky way you feel safe before you realize you're about to get bopped on the head with a lesson you did not know you needed to learn.

I read the passage from Luke first, just as we have today, and was far too confident when listening to the message of the parable. I'll take you through a bit of my process. **"Two people went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector."** Now this isn't my first time hearing a parable from Jesus, so right away I know that the person I want to identify with is the tax collector, because if there is a Pharisee in the story, they are going to be the one messing up.

The story continues **"The Pharisee stood and prayed like this: 'I give you thanks, O God, that I'm not like others – greedy, crooked, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn.'"** Well, here we are, right on cue, the Pharisee has already stepped in it. They have spent their time in prayer just bragging about themselves. Without reading on, the lesson feels clear here: don't go around bragging, even if it's just in your prayers. This feels more like a pat on the back for our congregation, rather than a lesson, because Mennonites already know that we should never brag.

Continuing on then: **"The other one, however, kept a distance, not even daring to look up to heaven. In real humility, all the tax collector said was, 'O God, be**

**merciful to me, a sinner.’ Believe me, the tax collector went home from the Temple right with God, while the Pharisee didn’t.’** At this point I probably should have felt the trap getting set out for me, but I absolutely did not. Confident as ever, I finished that scripture going ‘ta da, I have correctly understood Jesus’ example of how we should be in the world – time to find a complimentary scripture text from our lectionary to pair with it.’ And so, I set off, blissfully unaware of the wake up call I was about to walk into.

The section from Sirach starts out right in line with the ethics preached from the sermon on the mount: God’s care for the most vulnerable in our society. It echoes themes often found in the prophets such as Isaiah, who talk about how God does not side with those who exploit the poor for their own benefit. Very easy sell from my perspective. Reading those verses at OMC feels very much like preaching to the choir. Caring for those in need, and not taking advantage of the vulnerable are not controversial statements to make in this room.

Embarrassingly enough, it actually wasn’t until the last few verses that I realized that the premonition in Luke, **‘those who exalt themselves will be humbled,’** was about to come racing back at me. Sirach verse 16 states:

**To be accepted, you must give of yourself as YHWH requires –  
then your prayer will reach the clouds.**

**The prayer of the unpretentious pierces the clouds.**

The prayer of the unpretentious. Oh no. Going back and reading the Luke passage again is going to be a painful reckoning. Realizing that I have been very pretentious about not being self righteous, the irony of my situation began shining through.

I don’t know about how all of you are doing right now but at this point in the pandemic, ‘pretentious’ and ‘self-righteous’ are descriptions that are starting to fit me like a glove. I carry around so much fear and resentment inside me every day; it churns up inside my soul and makes this immense self-righteous borscht that I am ready to dish out and serve up at any moment.

On my low days, which are coming far more frequently than they used to, I walk around this world thinking of all of the things that I am doing ‘right.’ Switch out the prayer of the Pharisee for today’s context and you have me to a tee: **‘I give thanks to you O God, that I am not like those others in my province, never thinking of how their actions affect other people, not cutting corners in health and safety measures, only doing only what’s best for themselves. I wear my mask, got vaccinated, and I keep my social bubble small.’** Pretty gross right? Not the kind of prayer you want anyone to overhear, nor the kind that you want Jesus to recite back to you. Usually, I’m a trained enough Mennonite that I am not saying this to people’s faces, but the thoughts in my head and even the conversations I have with those that think like me, are really just us just chowing down on these meals of self-righteousness, and I think it’s making us sick

It is hard to stand up here and say that prayer out loud, because I desperately want to be a good person, and I know that this kind of behaviour puts me on the wrong side of Jesus’ parable. Please don’t think I’m going to justify my side of this story, with how all the actions I’m doing are right, because the parable isn’t criticizing the Pharisees behaviour; Jesus has no problem with the behaviour being reported. It’s the way my inner dialogue has begun to fester in me an attitude of contempt for other people.

I come to you because I believe in the power of confession. I believe that naming the toxic, painfilled thoughts and feelings that are harbouring up within me is the beginning of healing and transformation. I believe that a faith community is a place of relationship where we hold one another in loving accountability. And I trust that you will do this for me, and I hope that if any of you are struggling with these feelings, I can do the same for you.

So, I confess this to you, how I’ve let mefear, my anger, my social justice brain, warp into a place of resentment and contempt and self-righteousness. But that is just the first step on this journey. The next piece is actually folded nicely into our morning’s parable. It’s a transformation in my prayer life. In the twelve-step program there is a

worksheet that allows individuals to admit their resentments, name them honestly, and then begin transforming their hearts through prayer.

This is how it works; you fill out a sheet that says “I resent \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.” And they leave a good half a page so you can write out all the specifics of your resentments. Get it all done in black and white. Then you write “My part in my resentment is \_\_\_\_\_.” Now that’s a bit of a tougher one, but its an invitation to extract some of this self-righteous, pretentious poison out of our hearts and minds and give it over to God. Then you have your final step, the Resentment Prayer. The AA Big Book states (pg.552):

**If you have a resentment you want to be free of, if you will pray for the person or the thing that you resent, you will be free. If you will ask in prayer for everything you want for yourself to be given to them, you will be free. Ask for their health, their prosperity, then happiness, and you will be free.**

**Even when you don't really want it for them and your prayers are only words and you don't mean it, go ahead and do it anyway. Do it every day for two weeks, and you will find you have come to mean it and to want it for them, and you will realize that where you used to feel bitterness and resentment and hatred you now feel compassionate understanding and love.**

What an incredible call, especially now. To pray for each person that I hold resentment for everyday. And not just throwing their name in my list of prayers, but actually taking time to pray for their health, their happiness, to think of all the things that I want for my own life and to pray that they may experience these things. It is a very big task, and we are already exhausted, but it looks like this pandemic is continuing for a while longer, and with it, the divisive state of our communities. Without a big step towards changing my inner state, I think these toxic thoughts are going to really prevent me from loving my neighbours with the mercy and grace that I hope to be loved with.

If our own wellbeing is not enough of a motive to step in this direction, Sirach offers us another. Van Jones is a journalist and a lawyer and a couple weeks ago he happened to be a guest on a podcast I listen to. He shared stories from his life where he has fought fiercely as a lawyer for black men who are victims of police brutality, stories about forming accountability trackers within policing districts, and the work he has done for those who are incarcerated. He has strong opinions and has risked his life protesting for the rights of the disadvantaged in his community.

In this interview, he said that one of the things that is hurting the progress towards justice in our world, is the privileged purity mindset that has taken over activist circles. He goes on to explain that in his faith tradition, he has been called to serve ‘the least of these,’ not to make himself perfect and scoff at those who don’t live up to it. This has led him to make alliances with people with all different opinions and countering ethics to his own, in order to get work done. He says that in his life the only time things really get better for people who are suffering, is when you allow yourself to be open to unlikely alliances. There is no room for self-righteous criticism or prideful discrimination of others in the work of justice.

I think his testimony finds some Biblical backing in our Sirach passage. It recenters the work of God’s followers to finding solidarity with those who are suffering the most because of the injustice in this world. It rejects a system that takes advantage of the poor. But then it proclaims the powerful line: **The prayer of the unpretentious hits the clouds. Until it is heard, there is no comfort for them.**

If we really believe that our call is to bring love and mercy and healing and justice into this world, then I have to let go of my self-righteous attitudes. Not just because they are an ugly way to live, or because they are poisoning me from the inside out, but because they do not help those who need help in this world. Things are not going to get better until I can, with humility, lift up the prayer of the tax collector, admitting my faults, and then lifting up prayers for true peace and love to pierce the clouds.

So, I will end with a prayer of confession followed by a blessing for reconciliation by Jan Richardson. In the hope that we can enter into each day better than we have been, and knowing God's mercy is there to catch us when we are not. Let us pray:

Christ our companion,  
     you came not to humiliate the sinner  
     but to disturb the righteous.  
 Welcome us when we are put to shame,  
     but challenge our smugness,  
 that we may truly turn from what is evil  
     and be freed even from our virtues,  
     in your name. Amen.

### A Blessing

At the edges of our borders  
 you wait,

and at our territorial lines  
 you linger,

because the place where  
 we touch  
 beyond our boundaries  
 is where you take  
 your delight.

And when we learn to read  
 the landscape of our fears,  
 and when we come to know  
 the terrain of every sorrow,  
 then will we turn  
 our fences into bridges  
 and our borders  
 into paths of peace.

Amen.

*Sources: New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Alcoholics Anonymous, Jan Richardson The Painted Turtle Blog, Voice Together Worship Leader Resource, Expert on Experts Podcast featuring Van Jones*

**Benediction:** *VT #908*

From all that is broken,  
let there be beauty.

From what is torn, jagged,  
ripped, frayed,  
let there be not just mendings  
but meetings unimagined.

May the God in whom  
nothing is wasted  
gather up every scrap,  
every shred and shard,  
and make of them  
new paths,  
doorways,  
worlds.

Amen.