



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Eleventh Sunday After Trinity, Sunday, August 11th 2013

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠**

The Book of Common Prayer is one of the great glories of the Anglican Church. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that it is the Church's greatest glory. Not only is it the literary "Gold Standard" for the English language, it enables us to express in the most eloquent and economical way the feelings we rightly have when we come face to face with our Creator. Indeed, it elevates and translates our rather banal thoughts into prayers that encompass everything we do in our lives.

It is one of the most useful tools for worship man has yet been able to devise. It enables us to enter to right mode of worship as swiftly as possible. Immediately, we hear the Opening Sentences at Morning Prayer or the Collect for Purity at the Eucharist we are lead swiftly – and dare I say, efficiently -- into the way of worship. Indeed, its words literally prevent us from doing otherwise.

The Prayer Book with its wonderful eloquence enables us to express in an easy yet insightful manner every one of the thoughts and concerns we should be laying before God. Folks who know it intimately are able to use it to maintain effortlessly the sort of contact with God which is for the vast majority of us the highest form of prayer.

However one of the great problems with the Book of Common Prayer has nothing to do with its excellence, but with our own human frailty. It arises from the human mind's propensity to wander – to flit like a butterfly from thought to thought and subject to subject to no particular purpose and seemingly under no particular control or direction.

One of the activities that seems most readily to cause the human mind to desire to wander is the activity we call prayer. It doesn't seem to matter how we decide to pray – whether we choose to compose ourselves in a comfortable position or deliberately attempt to make ourselves uncomfortable – no sooner have we settled down in our pew and opened our prayer books than our minds start to wander, straying almost automatically from the subject in hand.

You know that sort of thing: "Why on earth does that woman wear that hat. It's so unbecoming. Gosh that's an absolutely frightful cologne Mr. So and So is wearing. How could his wife let him, get out of the smelling like that, She's such a sensible woman Well except when it comes to the frightful kids. They simply run amok wherever they are. While we're on the subject of kids, have the Whatsernames had they baby yet? My heavens the sanctuary ceiling looks dingy. Time for the vestry to get it repainted."

Jesus' his familiarity with our age-old problem of wandering minds is evident in today's communion Gospel: the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee is a person whose mind is wandering, while the publican, by contrast, has his concentration firmly fixed on the business at hand.

Prayers in the Temple at Jerusalem were rather like the prayers we use in church today. They followed time-honored formulae. They were composed with literary elegance and couched in formal tones. They followed the changes of the season, and were designed to enable the worshipers to commune

with God without having to hunt and peck in their minds for the right words to say.

Temple prayers – like our prayers – said what needed to be said economically, effectively and eloquently. Like our prayers, they were designed to focus the mind on worship and, like our own prayers, they also demanded a considerable degree of concentration. Today, many folks follow the liturgy in prayer books as a discipline to keep their minds focused on what they should be praying. But worshipers in the Temple were not so fortunate.

It might seem strange that the Pharisee was the man whose mind was wandering. He, after all, was the religious one. Pharisees were extraordinarily devout people. They went to great lengths to fulfill their religious obligations. They worshipped regularly at the Temple, studied the scriptures assiduously and attended the daily prayer services at their synagogues. Jesus, himself, was raised in a Pharisee family.

There's no denying that Pharisees took considerable pride in their piety and learning. But that doesn't seem to be true of the Pharisee in the parable. As his mind wanders in prayer, he doesn't claim to be better than other men because of his own intrinsic merits. He attributes his virtues entirely to the grace of God: "God, I thank thee I am not as other men are . . ."

Read the thing, and you'll see that, in fact, it is a very modest prayer. The Pharisee isn't thanking God because he's better than his bank manager, his boss or his next door neighbor. He is thanking God because he is not an extortioner, or habitually unjust, or an adulterer. His prayer is more an expression of relief than of pride.

The incident that prompted this prayer to slip, unbidden, into his wandering mind is that he caught a glimpse of the publican also at prayer. It is clear he knows exactly who the publican is. Indeed, it's not unreasonable to suspect that he has suffered at the publican's hands. They paid the government a fee to collect taxes in their locality and anything they could extort above the government's target was their profit. They reaped vast profits by means of extortion and blackmail. This particular publican is not only an extortioner, he is also an adulterer as well.

I guess most people – today, just as in Jesus' time – would be scandalized to find themselves sitting next to such a person in church. That, however, doesn't seem to be the way our Pharisee feels. He doesn't seem to resent the publican's presence in the Temple. It is merely that when he glimpses the publican beating his breast, he is distracted by the sight into offering up a quick prayer of thanks that God created him as a Pharisee and not as a publican. It's the sort of prayer Christians mutter every day: "There but for the grace of God go I."

One might, thus, reasonably assume the Pharisee's prayer is every bit as sincere as the publican's act of repentance. Why, then, does the immoral publican go home "justified" rather than the virtuous Pharisee? The fact of the matter is that the Pharisee could not see into the heart of the publican. He had no way of judging the depth of his sincerity.

Jesus constantly warns us against passing judgment on other people. "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not and ye shall not be condemned: forgive and ye shall be forgiven . . ." (*St Luke 6:37*). The problem is that, in passing judgment on other people, we are frequently unjust and uncharitable. In that brief flash of thought the virtuous Pharisee became guilty of one of the sins he so casually attributed to the publican: The sin of being unjust.

In choosing these examples – the virtuous the Pharisee and his mirror image, the dissolute Publican – Jesus isn't telling us the Pharisee is bad and that the Publican necessarily has a better grasp on the doctrine of freely redemptive grace. He is pointing out that it is wrong to make any assumptions about the state of other people's souls; especially other people we tend to despise.

What Jesus is telling us in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican is that it is not our job to condemn others for the sins they commit. That's God's job. We have got enough on our plates dealing with our own sins – especially the evil thoughts that pop into our minds when we least expect it. *AMEN*