



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Eleventh Sunday After Trinity, Sunday, August 7th, 2016

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

One of the most disturbing things about the human mind is its ability to wander – to flit like a butterfly from thought to thought and subject to subject to particular purpose and seemingly under no particular control or direction.

One of the activities that appears 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 are we ready to pray than our minds start straying from the subject in hand.

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

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.

Their religion was anything but skin deep. They, above all people, understood their obligations to their neighbors, particularly the sick and the poor. They tithed not only their income to the Temple, but their property as well. They regularly gave to charitable causes and made it a point of honor never to let a beggar depart hungry from their door. Jesus, himself, was raised in a Pharisee family. -

There's no denying that some 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.

Publicans were tax farmers. They paid the government a fee to collect taxes in their locality. Anything they could extort above the government's target was their profit. They were hated, despised and feared because 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 Pharisees couldn't read minds any better than we can today. Expressions of contrition were as much a part of Temple worship as our acts of contrition – our general confessions – here in church.

The Pharisee could not see into the heart of the publican. He had no way of judging the depth of his sincerity and in that only-too-human swift flash of thought he not only misjudged him, but was also distracted from his own need to repent.

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.

One of the most common of all human failings is our readiness to attribute – on the basis of very little evidence – bad thoughts and base motives to other people. We, effectively, assume we are able to look into their hearts and divine their innermost motivations. Thus we sometimes assign to innocent acts unsavory and sinister implications. And we do so not on the basis of what we know, but on the basis of what we feel and fear.

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.

Above all, it is dangerous to develop the habit of weighing our perceived merits against other people's sins and find them wanting. God doesn't award us bonus points for resisting sins we are not tempted to commit. Dwelling on the sins of others blinds us to our own shortcomings. This, in turn, hampers our efforts to reconcile with God. *AMEN*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.