

**Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 2/17/08**  
**Scripture: Luke 18:9-14**

### **“Get Real”**

*From the text: But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and praying, ‘God, be merciful to me...’” --Luke 18*

His name was Murray and he was a member of the church I served in Rhode Island. Murray and I could not have been more different from each another. He a rock rib Republican, a dyed in the wool swamp Yankee as they were called in little Rhody, a World War II vet and a conservative lifelong Baptist. Me: a liberal’s liberal, city-loving brie and Volvo kind of guy, a sometimes way out there Christian, often a bit too outspoken in my sermons. Inevitably I’d get a phone call from Murray saying he wanted to come to talk with me about something I’d preached from the pulpit. We’d meet in my office, debate, share, often agree to disagree, but every one of those encounters always ended in the exact same way. He’d move a little closer to me, look me straight in my eyes, take my hands in his and say, “OK John, now let’s pray together.” Then he’d pray to beat the band. He’d pray for blessings on me as a pastor and leader, pray for our church. He’d pray for his wife Jessi struggling with cancer, and pray for discernment about the thorny issue we’d just wrangled over.

Those meetings are among the most spiritually intimate I’d ever had with a parishioner, with anyone. They humbled and moved me because someone actually took the time and cared enough about me to pray for me, to pray with me, to pray boldly and to pray right out loud. They taught me one simple lesson about prayer. That prayer: no matter how we do it or when we do it or with whom we do it, prayer is first and finally and fully about getting real, getting real with our God, real with ourselves, and real with others.

Murray taught me to have the commitment to pray with others in the way he prayed with me. And so if you’ve met with me one on one or in a group since I became Pilgrim Church’s pastor, you may have heard me say one phrase at the end of our time together. “What would you like to pray about today?” And so we have prayed together and gotten real: prayed of broken hearts and broken bodies. Prayed for an end to war in the world and an end to war within our homes. Asked God for the strength to get sober or the strength to look for a new job. We’ve prayed for our kids, that they’ll be safe, our aging parents that they’ll die with dignity. Prayed for a teenager who fights against an eating disorder, an elder who struggles with depression. Very often tears accompany those prayers so I always keep a tissue box handy in my office!

Prayer: it may seem obvious but let’s name it: prayer is the bread and butter of the Christian life: conscious prayer, intentional prayer, regular connection with our God: talking to God and listening for God. But I think that sometimes we get a bit intimidated by the ritual of prayer. I know when I am among you in a committee setting or at a meeting, one of the surest ways to elicit dead silence is for me to ask, “Would anyone other than me like to close us with prayer today?” Eyes go straight to the floor and everyone stares at their shoes. We think our prayers have to be perfectly composed, in flowery language or “just so” poetry. We get too busy for prayer—let’s admit that most

of us do not pray with any kind of regular or ritualistic discipline. We leave prayer to the pros—let the pastor pray that one. We wait until Sunday to pray. We fail to pray because we wonder “Is anyone really listening?” or “How does prayer work?”

But prayer: folks it is not rocket science. You don’t need a Masters Degree in Divinity to pray. All we really need to pray is this: a commitment to get real, to get raw, to get honest, to be ourselves uncovered and uncensored with our merciful and loving God. Maybe that’s really why we don’t pray that much. Do we really want to get that real with our God?

That’s the question the two worshippers face in the classic Lukan parable we heard today. Two men go to the Temple to pray. The first strides right up to the front of the church, thrusts his eyes and hands upward and prays thus: “Oh God!” (Cliché piety always has a British accent!) “I thank you that I am not like ‘other’ people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like that tax collector cowering in the rear of the temple. No God: me? Well I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income to the church. I belong to Rotary! I have a perfect wife and well-behaved kids. The lawn at my house is perfectly trimmed and green. I go to the gym every morning and I have a great job. I am Mister Christian! So God thanks for all the blessings, and I’ll see you next week! Good luck with that schmo in the back!”

And then way in the rear of that church, in the last pew, as far away as one can get without being out the front door, sits a tax collector, a sinner, a human. She’s so aware of her humanity, her rough edges, her struggles, that she barely opens her eyes as she kneels in prayer and lays out for God all the rawness of her life. “God be merciful to me. I tried my best this week but still I fell short. I argued with my husband. I drank too much. I held back when a homeless man asked me for money. I skipped church and I slept in. One of my kids won’t talk to me. I’m worried about my job with the economy going south. I gossiped about a neighbor. And I wonder sometimes if I’m doing the right thing. So God please give me strength. Forgive me when I screw up. And just be with me. Thank you God. Amen.”

Jesus sets up this contrast in prayer to teach us of the right posture, the correct attitude to have in our prayers. The choice is always ours. When we pray: do we get real or just put on our Sunday best? Do we connect or cover up? Confess fully or hold back fearfully? Are we defensive or defenseless?

Getting real with God in prayer is not easy nor for the faint of heart. I find that when I pray honestly, really honestly with God, it can be hard to bring all that I am to the Divine for when I do I am forced to look at some things I don’t always want to: my warts, my fears, my obsessions, my unchecked appetites, my naked humanity, if you will. Our prayer relationship to God is like all the other relationships in life. The healthiest relationships are the ones in which we get real, the places we reveal ourselves wholly, the connections in which we are fully honest, with no secrets, nothing held back. And the unhealthiest relationships are the ones marked by secrets, by conflicts unnamed, by resentments unshared, by fears unspoken, by denial. Denial, after all, is not just a river in Egypt. Denial separates us from our God.

The miracle is that God is always waiting for us when, if we pray. That God already knows all of those bears that we wrestle with so we might as well fess up, right? That Jesus is not just waiting to pounce on us in punishment (a myth I think many of us

cling to) but instead our good shepherd kneels down to our level and gently says, “Come unto me all you that are weary and in prayer, I will give you rest.”

Rest—but first in prayer, we’ve got to be willing and honest, brutally honest, real. In Mark Twain’s “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” Huck learns this lesson of prayer all too well. In one poignant encounter with God, he tries to pray while holding back his truest feelings. “And I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn’t try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn’t come. Why wouldn’t they? It warn’t no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from ME, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn’t come. It was because my heart warn’t right; it was because I warn’t square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting ON to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth SAY I would do the right thing and the clean thing; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can’t pray a lie — I found that out.”

We can’t pray a lie. We can pray the truth. We can get real with our God: with soft hearts and open hands and trusting souls and confidence that the God we turn to is merciful, is loving, is kind, is real. In our rituals of prayer may we get real with God, real with others and real with ourselves. Lord: teach us to pray, really pray. Let all the people say, “Amen!”