

Friends, today you are in for a special treat. In addition to adding a second handbell group to the church, and a playground to the sanctuary, today we have the debut of our interpretive drama and dance troupe! I'm just kidding. We're not there . . . yet. But I did ask two people to help me today to act out the following scene from Luke chapter 18. So, sit back and enjoy as we hear this dramatic version of the word of the Lord.

[Jesus] told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: "Two [people] went up to the church to pray . . . [One] posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this [awful person]. I fast twice a week and give ten percent of my income to the church.'

¹³ "Meanwhile the [other person], slumped in the shadows, . . . face in . . . hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

¹⁴ Jesus commented, "This [second person], not the [first], went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

What a dramatic scene! Maybe we do need to get moving on an interpretive dance and drama team! We are so blessed! There is just nothing that this church can't do! Reformed and always being reformed, am I right? And I have to say, while Kathy just embodies humility and was an obvious choice, my casting of the arrogant man did not have anything to do with the actual character of the actor! He was just that good at acting!

Over the last few weeks, we have been blessed with some dramatic scripture readings. Last week we had the widow and the judge, and the week before that there was Jesus and the leper who returned with thanks and a few weeks before that we had Lazarus and the Rich Man - very compelling characters and storylines. All of these texts are fantastically vivid.

And as we've been discussing, we have traditional interpretations of these texts that have been retold for centuries. Straightforward meanings, but we've been looking for a hidden, deeper context.

The last two weeks in particular have been very heady and heavy. We've touched on some tough issues, and I'm grateful for your engagement with the text and your feedback.

But today, I want to keep things lighter. I want to talk with you about sin, and I want to share with you how this text and the application of it has changed my life for the better.

Twenty-two years ago, I arrived at seminary. I was a stereotypical, young, depressed, socially anxious, closeted, scripture on t-shirt wearing, construction worker/Baptist woman. Did you get all of that? And I discovered with great curiosity that the seminary required students to take not just a core set of courses including church history and Greek and Hebrew but also six semesters of spiritual formation. In spiritual formation, we did things like share our personal faith stories, practice verbal prayer, explore evangelism, practice discernment, find our particular mode of service that suited us best, and we learned contemplative prayers.

Of all that we learned, of all that we did in six semesters of spiritual formation, one thing has truly had a lasting impact on me, and I want to share it with you today because it is based on this text in Luke - this dramatic story, and I hint at it each and every week, though you haven't realized it.

So, if you don't remember anything else that I have said from the pulpit or written down, I hope you remember this. I hope this lingers with you for decades to come because I think that what I hope to teach you today has the potential to change you like it has changed me.

In our scripture, there are these two characters. One prays loudly and arrogantly, from a place clearly visible by the other temple visitors, a very self-centered prayer of comparison and pride. "I am better than these others. I check the boxes that prove that I live a spiritual life."

We all cringe when we see that body language and hear that self-righteous judgment, yes?

The prayer of the humble person is clearly the better choice. We have pity for the one who hides her face in shame and sorrow. We echo her prayer and ask for God's mercy on her, too.

When we hear Jesus praise that person and condemn the other, we agree, and we feel good because we anticipated that outcome before Jesus spoke it.

And friends, the good news is, there's just no hidden context that makes the first prayer better for any reason. Even in this season of stewardship, when we dare to mention words like tithing, we are not supposed to hear the first person say, "I give one tenth of my income to the church" and say to ourselves, "Yes! That's what we're supposed to do! Be like that guy!" That's not the message, no matter what you might think about the church asking for estimated giving for the next year.

But there is something about this text that you may not have ever heard of before. It's called the Jesus Prayer.

The Jesus Prayer is very simple and very profound. It is a contemplative breath prayer that has origins as far back as the 3rd century. It is still practiced today by the Eastern Orthodox religions. Anglicans and Catholics and some other denominations are familiar with it, too. I learned it as a Baptist, and it's entirely based on scripture.

It has a couple of different elements. First, the breath - you breathe in and out. In and out. Two inhales and two exhales. Some traditions say one in and one out, but I learned it as two in and two out. The breaths are deep. Second, with each inhale and exhale, you speak or think a line of the prayer - four lines total. On the first inhale, you say, "Lord Jesus Christ." On the first exhale, you say, "Son of God." Then you inhale again and say, like the person in the scripture, "Have mercy on me," and with the exhale, you finish with "a sinner." "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

You hear in this prayer the prayer of the person in Luke 18. "Have mercy on me, a sinner." And in this prayer, we pray to Jesus. We give him titles that have deep scriptural meaning by adding Lord, Christ, and Son of God. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God."

When we pray, we breathe in and out with intentionality. It gets more oxygen into our lungs and expels more carbon dioxide than the normal shallow breathing we do. It slows us down. It grounds and humbles us. It interrupts our normal patterns of life.

And the words remind us of who Jesus is to us and reminds us of our humanity.

This prayer is centuries old, still practiced today, and valuable. It can calm you, humble you, and give you strength. Some of you who grew up Catholic might even find it comforting to hold your old rosary and pray the Jesus Prayer with each knot or bead.

But the Jesus Prayer has the potential to be so much more than what I've just described.

Prayer is meant to be an approachable discipline – meaning we're all supposed to be able to pray. Even four- and five-year-olds can raise their voice to the heavens, but I know it is intimidating for many.

So, the Jesus Prayer, like other memorized prayer is a great place to begin. It gives us a consistent go-to when the words don't come easily – like the Lord's Prayer which we voice each week. If you want to get really simple, I'll remind you of a book I've mentioned before by Presbyterian and author Anne Lamott called *Help, Thanks, Wow*, which contains her simplest prayers for life. Help. Thanks. And Wow. It doesn't get much simpler than that.

But the great thing about the Jesus Prayer is that it's a little of everything. If you say it in the traditional form, it is the short, consistent prayer to fall back on. If you can't find the words, you just breathe it in and out with intentional breath. You can pray this prayer during the silent time of confession in the early part of the service when you don't know what else to say.

But the Jesus Prayer is also a bit like a Mr. Potato Head. You can take off the last two lines and swap them out for any possible variety of things you can think of. If you want to adapt it to be thankful, you say, (inhale) "Lord Jesus Christ" (exhale) "Son of God" (inhale) "thank you" (exhale) "for the sunrise."

If you want to adapt it because you want to pray for someone else, you're worried about them, you say, (inhale) "Lord Jesus Christ" (exhale) "Son of God" (inhale) "have mercy on Mom" (exhale) "she's sick."

If you are having a personal struggle, you can pray for yourself. "Lord Jesus Christ" (exhale) "Son of God" (inhale) "have mercy on me" (exhale) "I'm anxious."

This prayer is both traditional and modern, universal and personal, short and yet impactful. It makes you slow down to take the deep breaths. It's humbling and vulnerable. It's thankful and pleading. But it doesn't tell God what to do. It doesn't dwell on details. Sometimes prayer can seem like we're telling a cook how to cook or ordering a list of miracles off of a menu. Sometimes our prayers are redundant because we're explaining something to God that God already knows. The Jesus Prayer is just asking God to do what God thinks is best. Have mercy. You are God and I am not. You know what's going on even more than I do. Help. Thanks. Wow. Is enough. Two lines is enough.

I love this prayer.

One of the most important concepts that came out of the reformation of the church which is what Protestants around the world are celebrating today is that through scripture, prayer, and worship, we have direct access to God, through Jesus Christ, with the power of the Holy Spirit. The "priesthood of all believers" means that lay people, like yourselves, do

not have to have a priest hear your confessions or read scripture and interpret it for you. *You* can say to God, I have sinned. *You* can ask for mercy directly. You don't need me to be your intermediary. This prayer is one way to get you started down that path of approaching the throne of God with both humility and confidence.

As we prepare for worship each and every week, we laugh our way through announcements with light-hearted fun, but then, just before announcement time ends, every week, since the day I began my journey with you, I have asked you to take a deep breath - a solemn moment that transitions us from social calendaring to God-worshipping. Many of you have commented about how much you appreciate that moment, but what you not have known, until now, is that in that breath, and the one that follows as I turn and make my way to my seat, I pray that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, would have mercy on me, a sinner. Would speak through me, a preacher. Would be present through me, a pastor. Would lead through me, not to me. Would have mercy on my family, that love me. I say thank you so much for Andy. I say thank you so much for this church.

There is so much you can say with just two breaths. Let's try it together. I invite you to pray with me first the traditional prayer and then to make the last two lines completely your own. (inhale) "Lord Jesus Christ" (exhale) "Son of God" (inhale) "have mercy on me," (exhale) "a sinner." And now in your own way. (inhale) "Lord Jesus Christ" (exhale) "Son of God" (inhale) "have mercy on us," (exhale) "your people." Amen.