

GOD HAS A LIFE

Sermon for Pentecost 23C-Luke 18:9-14

LPC, 10/27/13

Back when I was teaching preschool, I noticed something about encountering my students outside of the classroom, say, at the supermarket. A 2- or 3-year-old may not recognize a teacher in an unfamiliar environment. Teacher and school are identified in the child's mind. The child has not yet developed the imagination to conceive that the teacher has a life outside the classroom, as the child herself has. The idea of teacher away from school is for all practical matters an oxymoron for the very young child.

Children, of course, begin life by being self-centered. They have to be. Self-centeredness is a matter of survival for a helpless infant. They first become conscious of their parents and other adults as extensions of themselves, people who are there to fulfill their needs. And good parents will indeed fulfill their needs, at least at first, gradually teaching them to do for themselves. But children in healthy homes begin by taking their parents' care for granted.

However, as their experience and their empathy grow, they realize that other people, including their parents, are independent organisms, who have lives of their own but care for their children as a matter of choice. The parenting instinct is strong, but choice is involved too. If there were no choice in parenting, there would be only good parents, and we know that is not the case. But good parents repeatedly make sacrificial choices on their children's behalf. Good parents usually do this gladly, without counting the cost, so it may be awhile before the children realize how much their parents really have done for them.

If the children are really wise, they may at some point realize that their parents have lives of their own. Hopefully this happens while the parents are still alive. If the children express gratitude, the parents may demur, but the parents will be gratified that they have raised empathetic children. The relationship between parent and mature child, cemented by gratefulness on one side and gratification on the other, enters a new and potentially more fulfilling level, based on mutual respect.

The premise of this sermon is that people do the same with God as they do with other people whom they initially know only in one context. They define God with a single context and are confused to discover God in another. People also do the same with God they do with their parents. They take God for granted. Unless they realize that God has a life independent of the context in which they themselves know God, their relationship with God will be stunted, childish and selfish.

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Now, we know this. It's pluperfectly obvious. Of course God has a life apart from each of us individually. But people sometimes behave as if God exists only to be their friend, or their parent, or their personal ombudsman. This in fact is a risk in identifying Jesus Christ only as your personal savior. In order for our relationship with God to mature, we have to realize that God has a life apart from us just as parents have a life that, inextricable as it is with their children's life, is not the same as their children's life.

God does not exist to answer our prayers. God does not exist to approve of us, to comfort us, to provide for us or to forgive us. God does all those things, but that's only *part* of what God does. God has a life apart from us, just as teachers have a life outside the classroom ... just as our parents have a life apart from us, but choose to care for us sacrificially all the same.

When we realize this and begin to thank God for all God has done for us, our relationship with God can enter a new and fulfilling level.

The Pharisee in today's story is an example of a person whose relationship with God is stunted by his own childish self-centeredness. Look how much of his prayer is about himself: "I thank you ... I am not... I fast... I give." God seems to exist in this man's prayer merely as audience for the man's monologue.

Contrast this with the way Jesus himself taught the disciples to pray: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom, come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Before the petitions even begin, God's supremacy and holiness are recognized. The person expresses submission to God's reign, authority and will, and the desire for that reign to expand and fill the universe. This address takes up almost a full half of the Lord's Prayer. Clearly, the Lord intends that before we plunge into our own concerns, we recognize God's greatness.

God has a life apart from us. God is so great. God does not need to attend to our puny prayers, but like any loving parent, God does. To keep in mind God's greatness reminds us that humility is the appropriate stance before God. To keep in mind God's greatness throws into greater relief our gratitude for God's mercy, and invites us into a deeper, more fulfilling and mature relationship with God. We have our lives because God has God's life.

God does not exist in our universe. We exist in God's universe.