Most of the evil in this world does not come from evil people. It comes from people who consider themselves good.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Reinhold Niebuhr

Prayer is one way we know God. Last week, we heard about the importance of Scripture in knowing God. This week we talk about prayer. Prayer is our way of communicating with God. Communicating with God through prayer is one way that we stay in relationship to God. God loves us no matter what, even when we as human beings fall short of the mark God expects of us. Yet if we want to be in good relationship with God and to go away from our prayers feeling forgiven and with our burdens lightened, we will approach God with contrite hearts.

This seems so simple doesn’t it. Yet, it isn’t always as simple as it sounds.

Think about any human relationship and about a time when we’ve done something that damages that relationship – for example, picked a fight with our spouse or our children or our boss.

If we continue to think thoughts such as “I was more right than my spouse” or thank goodness, I’m not as dumb as my boss, then even if we’re trying to repair the relationship, we won’t really succeed. Even if we say we’re sorry while thinking these thoughts, negative energy will still be separating us from fully being in relationship with that friend.

If we want to get back into the best relationship with them we say we are sorry and we mean it. And we trust in their goodness to forgive us.

God, of course, is always good and even more ready to forgive than is our boss or spouse. But, for our prayers to be effective in enabling us to receive and accept God’s mercy, we need to be sorry and to realize that we need that mercy.

Our tendency, however, is to try to justify our own behavior. We tend to look for someone who we think is a worse person than ourselves with whom to compare ourselves, perhaps because it makes us feel better. After all, we may tell white lies, but we don’t tell really big whoppers. Or we push ahead of another person in line at the grocery store or in seeking a promotion at work, but we don’t kill anyone. Or we said something mean, but it wasn’t as mean as what someone else said. We rationalize that we are mostly good people, while many other people in the world are worse than we are.

Yet when we do that, we become like the Pharisee. When we pray like that, we make prayer all about us and our righteousness. We may even say, God, I’m sorry I said something to hurt my friend’s feelings, but I’m so glad I didn’t say anything as bad as she said to me.

Instead of comparing ourselves to our friends, neighbors and others around us, I invite us to think about ourselves in relationship to God. God is always good and, so by comparison, we always miss the mark. It’s irrelevant whether we are better or worse than the next person because all humanity falls short of the mark.

Joan Chittester writes:

“Humanity is a mixture of blunders. That’s what makes it so charming, so interesting to be around. Because none of us is complete, we all need one another. It’s only when we convince ourselves that we are the fullness of all that is, that we become spiritually poor. The nice thing about being human is that you get to fail a lot. Value that; it’s priceless. It gives us such respect for everybody else. The reason clowns and slapstick comedians are so popular is that, if truth were known, we all see in them the parts of ourselves we try too hard to hide. When we take ourselves too seriously, we forget that the only thing we know for sure that’s eternal is God. Making mistakes is part of the growth process. We must learn to be much gentler about this with other people. We must also learn to be gentler with ourselves. Otherwise what we expect of ourselves, we will expect of everybody else. And that can be tragic. For all of us. Never be afraid to admit that you “don’t know” or “can’t find” or “couldn’t do” something. Our imperfections and inabilities are the only thing we have that gives us the right to the support of the rest of the human race. The gift of knowing what we lack is the gift we have to give to the abilities of others. As the Irish proverb says, “it is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

When we pray, I invite us to we approach God knowing that we are imperfect as other humans are imperfect – no more and no less. Then I invite us to realize that God alone is perfect and that God alone is truly merciful. Then I invite us to seek that mercy from God and to know that God is willing to forgive us. Then I invite us to trust in God’s mercy. Not our own righteousness, but God’s mercy alone justifies us.

1. *Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 5.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Joan Chittister in Aspects of the Heart (New London, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 2012, found in Synthesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)