

- Second lesson is from the gospel according to St. Luke the 18th chapter. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves "that they were righteous "and regarded others with contempt. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, "one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. "The Pharisee, standing by himself, "was praying thus, 'God, I thank you "'that I'm not like other people, "'thieves, rogues, adulterers, "'or even like this tax collector. "'I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income.' "But the tax collector, standing far off, "would not even look up to Heaven "but was beating his breast and saying, "'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified "rather than the other for all those who exalt themselves "will be humbled but all who humble "themselves will be exalted." This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- President Cohan has read the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. Jesus told a parable about people at prayer. Specifically about people at prayer who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and they despised everybody else. It is unsurprising to find a talk about prayer in Luke's gospel. It's one of the major concerns of this gospel. This is the only gospel where Jesus' disciples say, "Lord, teach us to pray." And in response Jesus told them this story of the Pharisee and the publican, a story about how to pray which is what we've been trying to do for the last 30 minutes. How do you pray? Now, the story begins. Two people went up to the church to pray. One is a Pharisee, that is a good Bible believing, church-going, moral person. The other is a publican, that is a bad, tax collecting, collaborator with the oppressive Romans, cheating, bad person. So Jesus says that any church and any service of prayer on any Sunday you mainly get two types of people, Pharisees or publicans. Pharisees, good people. Publicans, bad people. But for today's purposes, let us say that both of these types of people, Pharisees and publicans, happen to be parents. Let's take this as a story about Pharisees and publicans who are parents. Let's listen in on their prayers. One parent prays, God, I thank you that I am not like other parents. That couple that abandoned their children in Connecticut, the woman who smothered her infant child to death in Georgia, or even those people, what's their name, down the street who's always leaving their feral children unsupervised while they play tennis at the club. I thank you that I'm not like these parents. I thank you that I have planned and sacrificed and sent my children to the very best and selective schools and then there was soccer camp and the Duke Young Writers camp and the Young Leaders Camp and the Future Computer Programmers Camp and, Lord, you know none of that stuff is cheap. Not content with the intellectual and economic advancement of my children, I also force them to go to confirmation class at church. As our priest said, and I quote, it is good to find a parent who is truly committed to Christian education. Thank you God, Amen. Now, from what I've noted around here, behind every high academically achieving young person, somewhere there is a parent who is incredibly effective or, at least, manipulative. (congregation laughing)

And in my experience around here, these parents can be a real pain in the neck for those of us who have to administer their children here at the university because Pharisee parents who are good parents, who planned, who sacrificed, and worked for their children tend to expect a good return. I'd only been here about a year or so when I got a call from a parent and this parent had ordered flowers for her daughter's

birthday but she was uncertain that the florist had properly delivered the flowers to her student's dormitory room. She wanted me to go over and make sure these flowers were outside of that door when her daughter woke up that morning. Now, will you understand me when I said I felt sorry for that daughter? 'Cause there's a claim that good parents sometimes lay upon good children. On the other hand, I must say that these Pharisee parents can be marvelously supportive of our work here. A few years ago, somebody left one of the chapel doors open at night and these three random rowdies got in, they got up to the organ loft, and they were prancing about in the middle of the night, accidentally stepped on the organ bellows, broke one of the bellows. This tripped the alarm. The Duke police came, nabbed them. Next morning there was a knock at my office door and this large, unshaven male appeared and he introduced himself as one of those who had been nabbed by the police the night before. He said that we never intended to break or damage anything. I'm really sorry. I want to personally assure you I will pay for any damage that have been incurred. I complimented him on his sense of honor. I said it's really quite amazing that you would come back here and take responsibility and apologize. I think that's wonderful. He said to me, well, I didn't want to do it but my mother made me. (congregation laughing) "Your mother?" I said. He said, "Yeah. "When I called her last night "and told her what had happened, "I mean, she went ballistic. "She said things you shouldn't say to children." (congregation laughing) She compared me to the Nazis in the 1930's. She said they defaced religious buildings. You've defaced religious buildings. She told me, she said I am ashamed I went into labor for somebody like you. (congregation laughing) I said to him, I think I would like your mother. (congregation laughing) And yet as I've said, one of the trouble with the good parent, the contentious, resourceful, extremely attentive Pharisaic parent, is that sometimes these parents can look upon their children as projects, as their projects. All of that work on behalf of their children becomes a subtle claim upon the children. I need you to turn out okay to validate my parental sacrifices. Recently at a conference on higher education one of the speakers predicted that we're going to see at American colleges and universities the creation of an office of parental affairs. (congregation laughing) Because complaints by, interaction with, work for parents is consuming more of college administrators' time. What I'm saying in all this is that there can be something worse than being a lousy publican parent and that's to be a good Pharisaical one. And thus Jesus brings us to another type of parent at prayer. The publican. The bad parent. This is the parent that received the parents' weekend information in the mail but somehow forgot it. His daughter told him what time the chapel began but she waited out there in front for him, gave up, came in, took a seat, he finally shows up 10 minutes into the service, can't find a place to sit. Can't even actually get in the building and it's not just because it's a space problem. It's because he knows that in these religious buildings they're always talking about responsibility and righteousness and doing your part and he's incredibly uncomfortable in such buildings. So when it came time for prayer, this parent didn't join in with everybody else but stood at a distance outside and just mumbled, God, be merciful to me. I'm a lousy parent. I didn't mean for my marriage to break up and when my daughter was only 12. I thought I was working hard to give her all the things that I didn't have when I was growing up but now I realize that I gave too much to my work. I woke up one day and she was just all grown up and I've never really been able to talk to her and I'd like to tell her how I feel but now it's just too late to make a good start. God, forgive me for making such a mess of being a parent. Amen. Now, from my experience here these parents can be a pain in the neck. Sometimes they try to compensate for all of their parental mistakes by leaning on us at the university. They think that just because they're paying astronomical tuition that we can somehow make right all of their maternal, paternal goof-ups. Early in my teaching career, I dared to give a student a really bad grade. A C+ as I recall.

And the next day I get this fax from a law firm in the Midwest telling me that this father is really concerned, that his son is upset, he makes an appointment to call me the next day. I received his call. He told me that his son was devastated about the grade. He told me that he took the grade personally. He told me that my course had not been that well organized. He understood from his son that I had not been that clear in my expectations and his son had had trouble understanding my accent. (congregation laughing) I told him, look, your son is an adult or at least a novice adult. Your son was in class. You weren't. I'd be glad to talk to your son about the grade. I'm uncomfortable talking with you. With that, the father got belligerent. Now, as providence would have it I had just spent about an hour a couple of weeks before with this son in my office but then his son wasn't concerned about my classes. His son was concerned that his father, without consulting him, had remarried after his mother's death, marrying a woman who was only 13 years older than the son. The father had written to say we've sold the home, we're moving into a condo, and we're going to get you your own apartment for the summer. Well, the son was going around in my office saying I gotta buy groceries, I don't know what to do. I've lost my home. I've lost. Well, my read on the situation was here was this father's big chance to prove he was a good daddy by leaning on me. And yet some of these publican parents are more like the publican in Jesus' story. I'm thinking about the father reflecting upon his Duke daughter who said, I cannot believe that somehow I managed to raise a really good student. I hated school. I hated every minute of it. But she's unbelievably good. And what I liked was that tone of wonder, that surprise, that recognition of a gift that I caught in that father's voice. I like the mother who said of her daughter, she's taken advantage of all of her opportunities at the university. She is just thrived here. She's made such great choices. I totally wasted my four years at college and I've never recovered but she's a wonder. I find these parents to be a delight. They're wise enough to know that their children are not some person project, not some extension of their personality, an appendix. And thus the church has always tried to teach us parents to regard our parents as gifts, gifts of God, not as our parental possessions, as signs of the unfathomable mercy of God. That, by the way, is why I've always thought that the term planned parenthood was a misnomer because few of us plan to have a child who plays drum in a rock band, whose body is pierced in eight different locations, but sometimes that's the kind of child you get. None of us plan to have disobedient or difficult children but sometimes those are the children we get because children are not part of my plan. They're part of God's plan. Children are gifts and sometimes God gives us the gifts that we need more than the gifts that we thought we wanted. It's all part of the mercy. It's all part of God's dealing with us, to help us to grow into the grace of God. I remember one morning sitting across from one of mine and she could have only been about four or five and she asked me, "Where are you going today?" and I said, "Well, I'm going all the way to Michigan today." And she said, "What for?" And I said, "Well, I'm going to teach these people. "I will be explaining Jesus to these people in Michigan." And she said to me, "I certainly hope you tell them "more than you tell us." (congregation laughing) Like, where are you going to get something like that without children? Gifts. As a parent, I confess that one of the annoying things about children is when, many times, they turn out to be better people than you are and therefore you've got great difficulty taking all the credit and you realize this child is not some kind of extension of me. I didn't do this. This child's a gift. The significance of this child is hidden in God's unfathomable ways with the world. That's the trouble with both the Pharisee and the publican. That Pharisee takes way too much credit for his goodness but that poor publican maybe takes too much credit for his failures too. People, even people who are parents, are just not all that significant. We do this, we do that, but God is also busy doing and leading and impacting and we gotta learn, as parents, amid our achievements and our failures, we gotta leave some

room for the inscrutable, unfathomable ways of God with our children. A student was telling me that his father's parents had died when his father was just a boy. His father was raised by a succession of relatives. This meant that his father grew up without having had a father. Well, he said one day my father decided he would try to teach me how to drive and this he did by sitting on the other end of the seat, shouting orders at me behind the steering wheel and it was, "Turn left! "No, no, no! "Turn right! "Put on the break!" And he said finally I had enough. I said, would you stop that? This is crazy. This is no way to teach somebody how to drive. And he said my father said to me, "Hey, I never had a daddy. "I'm flying by the seat of my pants here, okay? "I'm having to make up a lot of this stuff as I go, okay?" The son, in credit to him, said I felt genuine compassion for my dad. So Jesus speaks to us Pharisees and to us publicans and telling us that maybe we're more inept than we admit. We're making up a lot of this stuff as parents as we go. We're flying by the seat of our pants. I remember talking to a grandparent one weekend here at Duke, talking about some trouble that the grandson was having at the university and I said I met with the grandson. I tried to talk with him but he didn't seem kinda ready to listen and the grandparent said, well, kids. What can you tell 'em? You know, one of the problems is they're too young. They haven't failed yet in life. And I said, oh that's so true. They haven't launched out yet into great achievements and not realize those achievements. That's true. And he said no, what I'm saying is they've never been married. (congregation laughing) And for all that, maybe that's one reason we love and we are surprised by stories like the one Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the publican because it's a surprise to find out that Jesus, the Son of God, the embodiment of everything God is, loves sinners and he tells a story in which you got a bad man and a good man and by the end of the story it's the bad man that gets embraced and made righteous in love by God. Maybe that's why every time you gather for church and the first thing the church makes you do is to confess your sin and you're sitting there, Reverend Copeland put it nicely about let's all stand up and talk about our shortcomings. Well, we're talking about our sin. And we all stand up and when we say things like God, forgive us for all the things that we've done and we've left undone and not done and I noticed it's particularly parents that seem to say Amen at the end of that prayer with particular gusto because here's a Savior that's come to forgive sins, even the sins of parents. Some people think, like, sin is something that you know is wrong but you do it anyway. Sin is something you decide to do. Well, if that were the case, who would be a sinner? Paul says everybody has sinned because sin is also messing up and it's launching out to do something good and ending up years later, say 21 years later, and realizing gee, that wasn't the right thing to do after all. But the good news is this God makes right what we mess up and do wrong. Jesus just loves sinners, only sinners. Or, as Martin Luther who wrote the first hymn of today's service once put it, "This God can ride a lame horse "or shoot with a crooked bow." This God can make right our wrong. Two parents go to church to pray. One who had always done right, whose child was the envy of everybody at the country club, good manners, good grades, good friends, got absolutely nothing out of the service. After all, what on earth could God give the perfect parent? But the other, surprise, even though he didn't quite get all the service 'cause he was standing so far off, the one who had made a mess of the whole parenthood thing, who had trouble communicating with her child, who had made a bunch of wrong decisions in child development, thought this was the best story she had ever heard in church. When a story was told about a Savior who forgives sins and makes right people who are wrong, she thought Jesus was talking about her. In the end, when it's all said and done, the best prayer we can pray as parents or as products of parents is the prayer of the publican. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. And the good news is, God is.