My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

We’re back talking about prayer again, aren’t we? We spend a lot of time on this because…well…it’s worth spending a lot of time on. Only in prayer do we have a chance to be still in our minds and hearts. Only in prayer do we have the opportunity to clear our cluttered selves and raise our inmost thoughts to God. Only in prayer are we prepared to be among our dark side, and gain some measure of understanding of how we can be both a good Christian and still achieve humility by not getting all too full of ourselves even when we get all too full of ourselves.

So are we still interested in prayer? Let’s look at the relationship between self-esteem and self-deprecation.

William James first defined self-esteem as the degree to which the self is judged to be competent in life domains deemed important. Charles Horton Cooley built on this and said self-esteem stems not only from self-evaluations but also the perceived evaluations of others. For decades, global self-esteem was seen to be practically good mental health. Part of self-esteem’s appeal is its link to positive states such as happiness and optimism, but when we focus too much on the “me, me, me” vision and pursue only our own goals and goodness without regard to others, we can end up taking ever less personal responsibility for harmful actions. We can even get angry and aggressive toward folks who threaten our own ego.

Self-esteem, to some extent is social dependent, or in other words, dependent on how others evaluate our actions. (repeat). Too much praise and, like we said, we can get downright narcissistic. And folks troubled with how to view their own self-esteem are highly focused on the implications of negative events for self-worth, making them more vulnerable to depression.

And there is a broad swath of us who typically value being kind and compassionate to others, but are often harsh and uncaring toward themselves. Therein lies the problem with Christianity: “have mercy on me God, for I am a sinner,” doesn’t mean I have low self-esteem.

But neither does it allow me to get narcissistic.

Kristin Neff, a professor at University of Texas at Austin, says that maybe self-compassion is a better, alternative way to think about a healthy stance toward ourselves that doesn’t involve evaluations of self-worth.

Intense self-deprecation can sometimes lead to a type of tunnel vision in which people become carried away by negative thoughts or feelings about themselves. Feelings of isolation also occur when we temporarily forget that failure and imperfection are part of the shared human experience. We can really start to suffer when we have a failure and think that people around us are starting to focus on the worst actions we’ve ever done. That’s often not the case, but try and convince someone who’s been through a divorce, war, crime, or accident, either as victim or perpetrator, and it’s tough.

We don’t need more martyrs to help this troubled world. We need focus on the now and the now-to-be. Self-compassion involves being kind toward oneself when considering weaknesses and failures, remembering that being human means being flawed and imperfect. It gives us room and permission to learn from our mistakes.

For Neff, self-compassion also means being aware of negative thoughts and emotions that affirms the reality of personal failings while keeping them in balanced perspective. This kind of mindfulness shifts our attention away from elaborative cognitive processing which creates negative stories about ourselves. We are moved toward the nonjudgmental acceptance of our present-moment experiences and actions, less held back by negative expectations while not projecting outcomes onto the future in either positive or negative light. Life simply unfolds.

Self-compassion tends to soften rather than reinforce ego-protective boundaries between our self and others, and research suggests that self-compassion is associated with psychological health. Higher levels of self-compassion are associated with greater life satisfaction, emotional intelligence, social connectedness and mastery goals, with less self-criticism, depression, reduced anxiety, less thought rumination and suppression, a reduction in the need to be perfect, and a reduction in associated behaviors which lead to addiction and eating disorders. That’s pretty cool. And Neff also found that self-compassion was positively correlated with increased levels of reflective and affective wisdom, increased personal initiative, more curiosity and exploration, increased happiness and optimism, and generally an overall positive affect.

Now who wouldn’t want that? The reason I’m telling you all of this is that in our story it looks as if we have a person at the temple who’s a little too full of themselves, and another one who it seems cannot even lift up his head and has not a word to say for himself. These folks seemed at opposite ends of the self-esteem continuum. Maybe we need to apply some self-compassion to this scenario, because again we’re talking about Kingdom of God living here.

So I’m going to ask that today, just for today, we consider that the God of compassion can come upon our selves and help us figure out how to rock in the world somewhere between these two extremes. Like the Pharisee, we can feel good about ourselves. We believe in God. We go to Church. We do good. But let’s not get all too full of our accomplishments thinking we have done all this stuff and hit a triple when we just might have been born on third base. But like the tax collector, we should also have the courage to say that we don’t do enough, that we don’t depend on God for things that we cannot control, and that we don’t credit God for the good in our lives. As we ask God to get involved in our lives, we have to start to see God more in our lives.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We live in this “me” generation with the emphasis on how good it is to look out for #1, namely ourselves. But fortunately we’re past the point of affirming “worm” theologies where we think we’re worthless and undeserving. We should come to believe Jesus taught, and God wants, which I believe is self-compassion.

Self-compassion from a Christian perspective says that God accepts our imperfection. There was only one person ever born on this earth perfect, and it’s not you or me or anyone we know. At it also says that at the same time, God also forgives our trespasses and sin, or those things that keep us from being at our Jesus-following best. And that’s because we are forgiven first, and let’s never forget that.

And finally, and most importantly, God loves to be in connection with us, for us to be what the Bible calls praying constantly, and what we might say is being mindful. New age philosophy calls this meditation. But Christians always have, and always will, call this centering “prayer”, where we ask God only for grace to accept us, strengthen us, and help us to try again to live into the great theme of the Gospel. What is that friends? (Love). And for that, I’ll pray every day.

Thanks be to God, Amen.