

“Needing God's Mercy”

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, October 23, 2016
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost**

Readings from Scripture: Joel 2:23-32 and Luke 18:9-14

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

Joel 2:23-32

Jesus 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 am 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!’” Jesus said, “I tell you, the tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Luke 18:9-14

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we carry within ourselves this day, the words that we have heard read from the prophet Joel and the Gospel of Luke, and the words that you have laid upon my heart to share. Touch, bless and transform these into a living word, a word of Jesus Christ for us, a word that sustains and nurtures our faith, that guides our life, that comforts our heart and encourages us to share our gifts with others. May that word be available to us all. Through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

I know there are a lot of you here this morning so this may get a little confusing, you may be bumping into people. I apologize. But I'd like all the Pharisees on that side, and all the tax collectors right in front of me. Wait, we could have divided it right here. (Indicating the congregation and the choir.) A good well-meaning Presbyterian comes to church on a Sunday morning, sits down in her pew, and, without even realizing it, thanks God for not being like someone else.

In the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, it is often too easy for us to dismiss the goodness, the genuine goodness, of the Pharisee. As I alluded to earlier, it is stewardship season in the life of the church. Did you hear that the man tithed? Ten percent. He knows his Bible; he teaches it. He instructs children, adults in the way of the faith. He interprets spiritual dilemmas for people. He is a leader in his community. And yet when he comes to worship with others, he stands there and instead of quietly praying to God from his heart, he says out loud, "I thank you that I am not like other people." None of us is that proud, right?

Earlier this week as I was thinking about the Pharisee, one of the things that I did was begin to inventory in my life all the times where I was aware of saying, "thank God, I am not like these people." When I was in junior high school, believe it or not, I was the center on the basketball team. I am 5'10-1/2". I am the same height now as I was then. I got to be the kid with the cool uniform and the cool work-out clothes and the cool bag that had the cool name of our junior high on it. It was filled up with some really neat sneakers and a bag of Doritos and big thing of diet Coke, because that's what I drank back then, and I got to be very cool. I remember going on one trip where we walked into the gymnasium of our arch rivals and I thought to myself, "Thank God, I'm not one of these hicks."

Then in high school I had the privilege of driving an ugly, tan Malibu station wagon to school. As I pulled into the student parking lot next to other cars, I thought to myself, "Oh, I'm a loser." But then I'd drive away and maybe go to the next city and to get there I had to drive through a Native American reservation, the Muckleshoot Nation. This was the time before the big casino and all the money rolling in. This was a time when they made their livelihood mostly by fishing. The houses were run down, the cars were up on blocks, the boats were falling apart, the nets were draped over trees. I can remember time and again driving through, thinking to myself, "Thank God, I'm not like these people." You'll be happy to know that your pastor at 51 years of age has outgrown that, right? To be honest, every day when I drive to church, I'm tempted at the corner, one block that way, as I drive right by that Methodist Church that's being remodeled—it's a four-way stop. I have to stop. I read the sign to see what the sermon's going to be about, and I think to myself, "Thank God I'm not a Methodist." I know it's not right, but I just can't help myself. I share these personal stories because I want to make the Pharisee real for us. I know I am not alone in this room thinking these thoughts at various times in our lives. The Pharisee is a real person and a real part of all of us.

And then there is the tax collector, the one who enters worship, sits far away, doesn't even look up but is sitting there banging his chest saying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." To be completely honest, these moments are real but too personal to share in public for many of us. But maybe you have been there. Maybe you have had that moment when you realize that what you had done just broke the heart of someone else. That moment when you feel the full weight of the hurt that you have caused by the way that you live your life. And you have that moment of awareness when you say to yourself, "I want to be better. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The passage in Luke is very clear that the tax collector who is becoming aware of his sinfulness and asking for grace and mercy to come his way is the one who ultimately is justified in the eyes of the Lord and lifted up. And there is part of me that says, "Thank God, the proud person isn't that one that's lifted up." But as a minister, I have seen too often people who internally keep beating their chests begging for God's mercy, for a sin that they have committed at some point in their life and they have not yet realized that Jesus Christ has forgiven that sin and set them free. I see people who, too often, are stuck. Lord, have mercy on me. Lord, have mercy on me. Lord, have mercy on me. And so I have wondered if there is a way out. Is there a way out for us between either being too proud or stuck in this mode of asking for mercy and being aware of our sinfulness and having that just weigh us down? Is there a way for us, a third way, if you will, for us to move beyond this tension in the story? I think there is. It doesn't talk about it in the passage, but I wonder and imagine what the tax collector did after he had this experience of banging on his chest, praying for God's mercy. Jesus said, he is the one that has been justified. And I have a sense that somehow the tax collector knew that, that his prayer had been answered.

I thought, what does a person do when they are lying in the dirt, their face this far from the floor. They are banging for God's mercy. They are praying, "Please, help me!" And God helps. That person stands up, dusts himself off, looks around. Makes sure it's real. And just like the leper that we heard about a couple weeks ago, says, "Thank you. Thank you, God, for saving me. Thank you, God, for making me right. Thank you, God, for doing what I cannot do for myself." I think the third way between having too much pride or being stuck in the awareness of our sinfulness is for us to cultivate an intentional practice of gratitude; to find and cultivate the ability to say, "thank you" even when things don't go our way. Can we stop and say, "thank you"?

I talked to a woman in the congregation this week who shared with me a spiritual practice that she had developed and I think it's perfect for a way for us to cultivate a practice of gratitude. She said as a Presbyterian, one of the things that she is frustrated about is that she doesn't get to have rosary beads in her hands when she prays. She wishes she could have the beads and run her fingers over them, one by one, and remind herself to say, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you." And so what she developed was a protestant rosary. She got a key chain and a piece of paper. On the paper she wrote out affirmations. Then she had the affirmations laminated and cut into little squares and punched a hole in the little squares and put them on the key chain so she could flip the cards, one by one, and read the affirmations—to remind herself she's loved, she's cared for, she has gifts and she can share them with others. I thought, "that's a cool idea."

So I brought that idea back to this passage in Luke and the story from the prophet, and I thought, "Here are things that we can put on our key chain, to flip through, to remind us that we are okay and that we can say, 'thank you'". The first one is obvious from Luke: "Lord, have mercy on me again. I am a sinner." Then I'd flip it to Joel, "I never again shall be put to shame. No more will shame grab me by the ankles and make me stop in life. Instead, I'm free." The next card: "The Spirit of God has been poured into me and to you." Then Psalm 65, "You, Lord, forgive my

transgressions.” Then Romans 5, “God proves his love for me and while I was still a sinner, Christ died for me.” And then Ephesians 2, “For by grace I have been saved through faith and this is not--underline not—my own doing. It is a gift of God.” “The Lord is my shepherd, I don't need to want for anything.” And finally, John 10:10 , “Christ came that we may have life and have it abundantly.”

It is my hope that all of us, when we find ourselves stuck in whether or not we are good or bad, whether we are right or wrong, whether we are helping or hurting, that each of us can stop in that moment, step out of that frenzy, appreciate the gifts and say, “thank you”. Amen