

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Have Mercy On Me”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, October 27, 2019

Joel 2:23-32

*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 afterwards
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.

Luke 18:9-14

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 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!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God we open ourselves to the power of your spirit and the way that your spirit can take the words of Scripture, of songs, and prayers, or whatever is on our mind this day or what you've laid upon my heart to share and transform these words into the living word of Jesus Christ. The word that will speak to us as individuals, as a community of faith, if we're courageous enough to listen and to trust. So help us not only be open but help us trust that this word is for us. Help us to be nourished in our faith, comforted in our worries and courageous in our outreach. All of this we ask in your faithful name. Amen.

So I have lamented before that our tradition, our reformed tradition, and a scriptural emphasis, always seems to talk about salvation being saved by God and justification, being made right in the eyes of God. And that somehow this focus on salvation and justification keeps us stuck in sort of a primary school of faith and that we never get to graduate and grow and mature into being Christ-like people. A lot of it is because the scriptures were written when the faith was new. And the focus was on the amazing work that Jesus Christ has done for all people, especially for us. But Calvin, on this reformation Sunday, one of the fathers of our faith, talks about the twin graces; being justified, being right in the eyes of God, and sanctification, our becoming more like Christ. And so today in our reading and in this sermon, I want to lift up this idea of being made holy or Christ-like in our lives. And the easy thing to do, the obvious thing to do, is look at the parable and lay these two men side-by-side--the Pharisee and the tax collector. And all of us know that we would not be the Pharisee because he is the obvious scoundrel in the parable. It's a little difficult for us to see ourselves as tax collectors, but hey, we want to go home justified so let's hook up with that one and be against the Pharisee and everything's going to work out great.

But is it that clean or clear? I don't know. And the reason I don't know is because I had the privilege of going to Petco this week to pick up our beloved Ella. After she had gone to the beauty parlor and had her hair cut and shampooed and her nails clipped, for some reason, now that Petco is at Watson road and the River Des Peres, instead of getting back on 44 and coming home, I stayed on Watson road all the way to Denny's and I hung a right on Lindbergh and came down under the overpass of 44 on my way back home to drop her off. As I stopped at the light right at the gas station just before the overpass-- and because it's Kirkwood, there's another stoplight five feet in front of that. As I stopped at the first one, I noticed a gentleman with a cardboard sign on the median asking for money. As I got to the second stoplight, I noticed that just further along, also in the center of Lindbergh, was a woman, a young woman with a sign asking for money. And to the right off the off-ramp of 44 was another gentleman, a different one, with a sign asking for money. I sat there at the second stoplight and my first thought was, I can't believe the police department in Kirkwood allows this to happen. But I'm not a Pharisee. I don't stand and think I'm not like others. I'm not like these people who are homeless and have cardboard signs. No, no, no, because we know we can't be like Pharisees. But it got me thinking, it really got me thinking how easy it is for all of us in those moments sort of unbidden to have that voice rise up inside of us that Pharisaic voice that says, "Thank God I'm not like those people." Sometimes we even say it nicely as, but there am I for the grace of God. But it's the same thing. I'm better than them. I'm not like them. I do the right thing. And that voice is real.

And I heard that voice rise up within me. In the midst of this week preparing for this sermon, where I'd remember that one of my heroes in the more contemplative approach to Christianity, Father Thomas Keating, wrote a book on a different parable The one about Mary and Martha, and it was titled, *The Better Part*. In that book, he talks and sort of exaggerates and extrapolates the Marthanness of our society, of the busyness, the craziness, the demands that are placed upon us, all the distractions that we have in our lives. And he says that's real but what you need to do or what this way of praying can offer you is to embrace the Mary part or the Mary role of being at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching and understanding his word for you. The quieter part that sits and adores God's presence. He labeled that, *The Better Part*. And in a sense, the invitation like the parable is for us to decide which one am I. Am I the Pharisee or the tax collector? Am I the Martha or the Mary?

As you may have guessed, the realization that struck me from the apple sermon to the children, was that maybe the distinction between the two is not as easy as the parables, or as father Keating lays it out to be. And it wasn't an apple that gave me that idea, it was an oyster; because years ago when I was preparing to do the meatball dinner for someone that had paid \$10 to bring four of their friends with them to my house to have an Italian meal, I had the great idea of flying in a whole bunch of seafood and doing an Italian seafood dinner. One of the things I ordered besides Dungeness crab and a big plank of salmon was two dozen Kumamoto oysters. Kumamotos are these tiny little oysters. Have you ever shucked an oyster? It's like trying to engage 1000 razor blades with a knife--the shell is sharp. It's got all kinds of variations to it, every edge of that shell is razor-sharp. And if you're not careful, you will bleed. I took those things, had a little towel, put it in my hand, put the oyster in there, took the knife, tried to get it in there finally working it around, popping it open and inside the shell was this tiny, little fleshy part. And the idea that I had was I would lay out a plate with ice and put three raw oysters on the plate and serve that first and watch people in

Kirkwood squirm when it came to eating raw oysters. That was my plan. 24 slurps later, there was not one oyster available for anyone else because I ate every one of them. They were delicious. The taste of ocean and, oh, it was so good. And I don't know why this stuff comes to me during the week. It's the crazy part of life for me. But it dawned on me that when I was doing that, like you're fighting the outside to get to the inside, it's just like what part is the oyster? Is it the outside, the shell, or the fleshy inside? And as the children rightly guessed when they asked about the apple is it the skin or the meat of the apple, it's both, the same thing with the oyster. It's both. It's both shell and the fleshy soft part. The part that's outer protective and the part that's alive on the inside. Or as father Keating says in his book, "the true self and the false self, the false self that we all have, is protective, it's egoic. Its sole purpose is to protect what's inside. The true self is the soft part of us, the loving part, the giving part, the caring part." And his advice, just as the parables, is that you've got to work on the true self or the tax collector part of you, and try to get rid of the Pharisaic or the false self.

But what I've come to see this week, as I've lamented about our sort of spinning around and around the sacraments and salvation and justification, is that there's a dynamic between those two poles of who we are, the Pharisee and the tax collector, the true self, the false self, the Martha, the Mary. And rather than getting rid of one, we need to embrace both. And we need to befriend that part of us that's Pharisaic. We need to befriend that part of us that says thank God, I'm not like them. Because that's the only way we're able to transform it and transform ourselves. Because in a world that too often divides between us and them, this or that, right and wrong, Martha and Mary, we have to realize that all of us are both all the time. It's both-and, it's not either-or. And that the only way to bring all parts of who we are together into the grace of God, and to allow God's Spirit to work upon us is as it says here, to humble ourselves, to stop fighting, to strive for both sides to be lifted up and embraced.

And I ran across the story that talks about the power of befriending our false self or our Pharisaic itself. The story is out of an English newspaper and it was about a woman who lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was written in 2011. And one of the best parts about the story were two pictures, which I'll get to. The story is of a woman named Mary Johnson. She had a son who was 15 and he was gunned down and killed in an argument with a friend of his who was 16 years old at the time, O'Shea Israel. O'Shea was tried and sentenced to 25 and a half years and spent 17 of those years incarcerated before he was released. About halfway through his sentence, Mary Johnson realized that she had not forgiven him. She wanted to see him locked up for the rest of his life. He had taken her only son and she had that awareness that her not forgiving him was like a cancer that was eating her from the inside out. And so she finally decided to do the unthinkable, to reach out to him and to try to go visit him in prison. She sent the request and for nine months Mr. Israel refused her request to meet. But finally, he relented and agreed. They met, got to know each other a little, she kept visiting. The visits became more frequent, they became friends. And when he was released, she helped him find a place to live. Now the pictures in the newspaper were of like townhouses with two doors that are real close to each other. The border around the doors is painted red and above one door it said 602 and above the other door, it said 604. And under 602 was a picture of Mary Johnson and under 604 was a picture of Isaiah Israel just standing there. And the story talks about her helping him move into the apartment next to hers. The next picture, which is the same thing taken moments later, is the two of them hugging each other. And it talks from her perspective about the power of forgiveness and what it's done for her. How, in a sense, she feels like she's been able to stop the cancer.

As he shares, it's really hard for him to accept the fact that she's forgiven him. He still struggles with that. He has moments where it's easy to accept that forgiveness and then there are times where he doesn't forgive himself at all. And what I came to realize is that in the midst of our hearing parables about good and bad Pharisee and tax collector, anytime we divide things up, at some point, we need to realize that it's really those things within us, we are Mary and Martha both together all the time, we are Pharisee and tax collector always together. That's just who we are until we get to heaven. And to me the the rhythm of coming to church and sharing communion and baptisms and everything that we do, even though it seems to tell the same story over and over again, it is in that tension between the poles of sinners who come to church and hear the message of grace, somewhere in the midst of that rhythm every week there's an energy that flows, an energy of mercy and grace and love. And so my encouragement to you in the weeks ahead is to befriend those parts of you that you try to get rid of. Befriend those parts of you that maybe you're even ashamed of, and just see what that friendship with yourself might do. Amen.