

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, October 23, 2016

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. 31The 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.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

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: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, O Lord; you are our rock, our Redeemer. Amen.

Have any of you ever bumped into someone you knew, someone who was going through a tough time, and thought to yourself: there but for the grace of God go I?

It's a common phrase. We've all said it at least once I imagine. And I would hazard a guess that what we meant by that phrase was something like, if it wasn't for God, I might be just like this other person who is struggling with their life.

I sometimes think like this when I see the people on Hiawatha Boulevard heading to Malden Road. But doesn't that phrase sound suspiciously like the Pharisee in our Gospel lesson this morning? Doesn't 'there but for the grace of God go I' sound a lot like 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers...'?

I am beginning to think that it does.

While God wants us to be thankful for the blessings in our lives, I don't believe God wants us to elevate ourselves over others in order to feel better about our circumstances.

The parable recounted in Luke reminds us of just that: the despised tax-collector who humbly asked for mercy went home justified, or forgiven. The Pharisee, full of himself and thankful that he was not like other people did not.

Both of them were outside of the faith community. One of them separated himself from the community because he believed that he was better than the others, and one of them didn't believe that he was good enough to be a part of the community.

If we were to look for ourselves in the Luke passage, there will be times that we recognize ourselves in the Pharisee: there but for the

grace of God go I. And there will be times when we will see ourselves in the tax collector: I am not worthy to be a part of this wonderful community.

The truth embedded in this parable is that we could all choose to live our lives the Pharisee, and exalt ourselves over others, or we could choose to be the tax-collector, and humbly acknowledge that we, too, are flawed and imperfect. It is up to each of us to decide which one of these characters we wish to be in real life. The one who thinks they are perfect, but who will be knocked down in due course, or the one who is aware of their imperfections and knows the necessity of God's mercy in order to be forgiven.

And every time we get the urge to exalt ourselves by lifting ourselves over others, we have an opportunity to practice humility. And every time we practice humility, and ask God for mercy, we take another step towards forgiveness.

Does anybody remember the Dr. Seuss story about Yertle the Turtle? Where Yertle longed to see beyond the confines of the little pond in which he lived, so he had his neighbors stack themselves on top of each other? Just like Yertle the Turtle, when we step on the backs of our fellow pond dwellers, we risk being knocked down into the mud when we choose the way of the Pharisee.

The Pharisee is pretty clear with his prayer: God is nearby, and need only observe his fasting and his tithing to see what a good and faithful subject he is. The Pharisee doesn't really need God for anything, he's followed the rules, he's done it all correctly...and he points out that he is vastly different from that poor old tax-collector far off. He comes off a bit smug, doesn't he?

But the tax-collector is a mess. Upset, hitting himself, praying to God for mercy, confessing his status as a sinner, he has no inclination of

comparing himself to anyone, much less the Pharisee over by the temple. He is overcome by his great need to be forgiven by God, and his prayer is a simple, if not a powerful one. 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Now, I'm not suggesting that we go around beating our chests and shouting out loud for God's mercy.

I'm suggesting that we look inside our hearts, and in a sincere and humble way, pray for God's loving mercy, for we are all imperfect in our own unique way.

We are all in need of God's loving kindness, and we all need to be accepted, just as we are. And when we can pray that prayer with integrity, God promises to receive us, welcome us, pardon us, cleanse us.

It's a strange concept, I know, but consider this: God needs us to need God. Our relationship with God depends on our need for forgiveness. If we imagine ourselves as perfectly fulfilling our duties as children of God, with no need of forgiveness, what do we need God for?

If we imagine that our way of life is the best way, if we think that those who don't do things our way are somehow inferior, or less than we are, if we live like we are better than others, we run the risk of turning into a Yertle the Turtle. We will end up falling into the mud.

God does not need us to be the protectors of the faith, to be the judge and jury of another's life circumstances. God needs us to need God.

So why is it that whole denominations and countless churches spend much of their time pointing fingers at those who are different than they are? Why is it that the Christian institution has developed a

reputation among young people as being judgmental and hypocritical, irrelevant to the modern challenges of life?

Perhaps because too many churches pray as the Pharisee did, and not enough churches pray as the tax-collector did...

I take great comfort in the Word of God in our Hebrew scripture this morning. Joel's prophecy, told in a poetic form, reminds us that God promises to pour out God's spirit on all of God's faithful children, and that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Everyone. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.

I don't believe that giving thanks for not being like some poor tax-collector qualifies as calling on the name of the Lord. I do believe that when we pray for God's mercy, and when we acknowledge our imperfections as sinners, that we are calling on the name of the Lord.

This very private, very personal prayer can occur at anytime, in any place. It can occur here, as we gather together to worship God, but it also needs to occur outside of our gathering time.

Luke's lesson is a short one. Just 5 verses of Jesus telling a parable.

But the lesson has life-long application.

Can you put yourself in the position of the tax-collector? I know none of us have earned huge amounts of money by taking advantage of our neighbors, like he did, but his obvious sin is a metaphor for our more hidden, private sin. We all are in need of God's mercy.

The promises made in the prophecy from Joel will come to fruition when we can call on the name of the Lord with integrity and humility.

In our humble prayers, let us learn to be more comfortable with our imperfections, and acknowledge our sins with honesty and hope. Calling on the name of the Lord and asking for God's mercy will naturally flow from our prayers when we confess our faults and failures as God's children.

The paradox here is clear. If we fake it, and pretend that everything is fine, God will know. Simply following the rules like fasting and tithing do not guarantee our forgiveness. We will not be forgiven if our prayers take on that 'there but for the grace of God go I' tone.

But if we're honest, painfully honest, with our God, God will pour out God's spirit upon us, male, female, rich, poor, all of us who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Just as we are. Without one plea. Amen.