

October 27, 2019

Luke 18:9-14

Pastor Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

"A Humble Heart"

"Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays," a famous quote of Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian. I agree with him and truly believe in the power of prayer that it is not only a way for us to connect with God and tell God about how we feel and what we worry about it, but also a way to transform us, shape us and expand our hearts to a greater capacity to love. So the context of our text this morning is wrapped around a theme of prayer. In fact, Jesus continues this theme. In the beginning of chapter 18 Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow and a judge, and Larry delivered an incredible message about God's goodness and our persistence in coming to God in prayer. So, today the context of the parable is the prayer itself. Two characters, a Pharisee and a tax collector, both went to the Temple to pray.

A disclaimer, right at the beginning of the sermon: Jesus used the characters of the Pharisee and the tax-collector to look into the depth of human psyche and those were the stereotypes that people of his time could relate so easily and were easy for Jesus to make his point. In my preaching today, in any way I want to say, especially when I will talk about the Pharisee, that all the Pharisees of the first century Judea were self-righteous and judgemental or all our Jewish brothers and sisters then or now are like that as well. So with that, let's begin.

A Pharisee and a tax-collector went to the Temple to pray. So we hear the Pharisee praying. "Oh, God, thank you that I am not like other people, the robbers, adulterers and God forbid like this tax collector. I fast twice a month and tithe on all my income." Do you hear the words of Mary Poppins in his prayer, "I'm practically perfect in every way..." Pharisees were religious leaders, well-respected people in a community. They were expected to be perfect and pious. In fact, what I have learnt from reading the notes from the Cultural Background Bible that thanking God for one's religiosity was considered pious and humble. So, in his prayer the Pharisee tells God how perfect he is. He is better than others. He honors God properly with his fasting and tithing of all his income which would be going even farther than the religious rules of his day were asking for. It almost seems like that his prayer was not even addressed to God, but to those who were around him. Almost like he wanted them to know how perfect he was.

This week my husband, Josh, and I have a house guest. Our friend and a great organist from Switzerland is in town to play a couple of concerts with Josh. By the way, it is exhausting to have a house guest. We have not had one for a while and I forgot how much energy it takes. I love our friend and happy to have him, I just forgot. Because it really starts before the guest even arrives. A few days before he was coming, I started slowly preparing our apartment for his arrival. I planned for all of the things to be put away, to clean all the bathrooms, to wash the bedding and make a new fresh bed for him that smells good, clean the floors, finish all the laundry. I wanted our apartment to look impeccable.

Josh said to me while I was running around the apartment and making it all happen, “Hey, don’t do all this work. Remember his home in Switzerland? Our house does not have to look perfect for him.” Remembring our friend’s untidy home, I said, “Well, we are not like him. Yes, our place needs to look perfect.” As I was cleaning, I remembered that it runs in my family that when the guests come, the home should look perfect. It is almost like if our home looks perfect, maybe it would show that we are perfect too. What is this obsession to show the world that we are perfect, when we know that life is messy? Didn’t the Pharisee know about this? Why would he pray to God the way he did?

In contrast to the Pharisee, a second character in this parable is a tax-collector. He was standing in a corner of the Temple. I can imagine in our sanctuary, would be like right there by the crier room. He was hitting himself in his chest and praying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Tax collectors in that culture were regarded as dishonest, and were suspected of working with the foreign governments. People did not trust them and looked at them with disdain. They were outcasts of society. That is why the Pharisee did not want to be like a tax-collector. Noone wanted to be like a tax-collector. Yet the way Jesus tells the parable shows that this tax-collector seems to have something in the way he prayed that made him humble and righteous in the eyes of God. You see, in the Pharisee we see self-righteousness, judgement of others, a reliance on himself. Aa pretense that he got his stuff together. That leaves almost no space for God. But the tax-collector knew that he was imperfect and he was in need of God. Hitting himself in the chest was a sign of repentance and admitting one’s own sins before God, admitting one’s own limitations. Because we forget that even though we are beautifully made in the image of God we are imperfect, limited, and prone to sin. We forget about those realities. We resist them. It could be really painful.

The other day I was visiting an elderly lady in our congregation who has been ill and in and out of the hospital for the past few months. I was holding her hands as I asked her how she was doing. Tears started falling down her cheeks, she said she had a setback: she got sick that morning during her therapy. She was working hard for a few weeks to make progress to feel better and to go home. It took a lot of effort. It took a lot of time. So this setback made her very upset. As I sat with her, I said, “It is hard to accept our limitations, isn’t it?” And the tears were falling even harder. It is hard to admit the limitations of our lives, of our very existence. Our bodies tend to get ill and develop diseases and get weak when we get old. We grieve and get sad when we experience loss and that can prevent us from moving forward and live a normal life. We make mistakes. We compare ourselves to others and tend to judge them. With our actions we deliberately or consequently hurt others. We miss the mark. We sin. And it is pretty darn hard to admit this, to look into the face of this reality of our limited existence.

It takes vulnerability and courage to do this. It was Brene Brown, an author, a research professor at the University of Houston, and a storyteller, who has done the famous Ted Talk on vulnerability. If you have not had a chance to listen to it, do it sometime this week. In this Ted Talk and her multiple books on vulnerability, she talks about the whole hearted people. She called the whole-hearted those who were kind and compassionate to themselves and had the courage and vulnerability to admit to themselves

that they are imperfect and to be okay with it. I would call the tax-collector a whole-hearted person. With very simple seven words he says it all, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

He did not paint a beautiful picture to God and to others how perfect he is, neither did he give God excuses why he was not perfect. In his simple prayer, he admitted his limited existence and invited God into his experience. He showed that his heart was confident not in himself and the things that he did but in God and God’s mercy and love. He was vulnerable, honest, truthful, with no pretense or facade before God. And in this he was made righteous and humble. You see the word “righteous” does not mean to be perfect. It means to be made right with God - to turn our hearts to God and align our hearts with God’s purposes in this world. And perhaps a good start to this path of righteousness is a prayer with a humble heart, when we turn to God with our limitations, our pain, our guilt, and imperfection, where we come to God as we are. Life is messy, and we are imperfect, it is okay. We don’t have to be perfect to truly come, with open hearts, as we are, into the loving arms of God. It is in prayer our capacity to love ourselves and others grows. In prayer our hearts expand. Perhaps, it is when we have faced our own stuff, we can become more gentle and loving towards others.

It is the words of the tax collector that were used as the words of one of the most popular Christian prayers, The Jesus Prayer or sometimes known as the Prayer. It is a prayer that mostly known and practiced in Eastern or Orthodox tradition of Christianity. It has been used since the 2nd or 3rd centuries starting with the Desert Fathers. But it is making its way to the Western world and I think it is beautiful that we can exchange these various spiritual practices of other expressions of Christianity to help us find our way to connect with God. The prayer goes like this,

“Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have Mercy On Me, a sinner.”

Repeat these words after me. One more time. It is a simple prayer but it contains some profound theological truths for us. In this prayer, we call upon the name of the Lord, we confess that Jesus is the Lord of our lives and we cannot do this life without Him. We name the humanity of Jesus, who can relate to us and our limited existence. And we name his divinity, Christ, Son of God, that through Him we have access to God’s abundant mercy and love. We name our limitations and that we are not perfect. And when we call upon God’s mercy, we do not only ask for forgiveness, in God’s mercy we ask for less pain, less stress, less anxiety, for strength, for peace or for whatever we need to go through the situation we are in. We can say this prayer only once or we could repeat over and over again that it becomes a way of life, a way of a humble heart and a whole-hearted person.

Our invitation for this week and the upcoming days is to spend time with God in prayer, as vulnerable and honest as we can be, letting our heart be expanded and filled with love. Amen.