



SUNDAY SERMON

Humbly Finishing the Race

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 18, verses 9-14

Jesus told his 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."

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our God and Redeemer. Amen.

Part of Jesus's teaching was the telling of parables. Jesus used these parables to help people see the world through a new lens. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, Jesus turns our "world upside-down which is right-side up." So what is Jesus trying to show us in this parable? And is that consistent with the message we get from reading from the second letter to Timothy? At first glance, they seem to be in conflict, but are they?

Today, we hear the story of two people who went to the temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee. While he was praying, the Pharisee thanks God because he is "not like other people, [he] fast[s] twice a week and he give[s] a tenth of [his] income (Luke 18:12)." Not only does he do all these good works he is even better than all those other sinners, you know the "thieves, adulterers or even like THAT tax collector (Luke 18:11)."

While the other person in our parable, the tax collector, did not even enter the sanctuary, rather he stood outside the door and prayed. This tax collector knew that he was considered unclean therefore he was not welcomed in the temple; he did not even dare to look up, and all he said was "God, be merciful to me a sinner! (Luke 18:13)."

The people listening to Jesus telling this parable would have thought that nothing interesting had happened so far. The prayer of the Pharisee would be something that they would recognize, and would have heard before. As for the tax collector they all knew that he was unclean, and did not do any righteous acts to be welcomed into the temple. If we were there on that day listening to Jesus say this story, what would we think? Would we think that the Pharisee was right in boasting about his works and in thanking God that he is better than the rest? Or would we welcome the tax collector in, even though he is a sinful man but he is full of repentance? If we really follow Jesus and His teachings, which one would we do?

Jesus does it again; he turned the world of the people listing upside down, by telling them that only one of these men went home justified that day, and that man was the tax collector. So is Jesus in any way telling us that doing all the righteous things that we have all been told to do all our lives does not matter? Should we not even worry about tithing, being nice to others, helping others, or any other good deed? Of course, that is not what Jesus is teaching us.

Continued

DATE

The Twenty Third
Sunday after Pentecost
Sun., Oct. 23, 2016

PREACHER

Wadie Far, Seminarian

READINGS

Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22
Psalm 84:1-6
2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Jesus is rather teaching us this morning, that all these acts can be reduced to nothing, if we do not humble ourselves before God. We are expected to do good, to tithe, to care for the stranger and the weak, and to help the needy; however all these works are reduced to nothing without our faith in God, and our humility before God. Jesus is telling us that we cannot achieve our salvation by our works, rather we achieve that by our faith, and then our works become our natural response to that faith, and to the grace we receive from God through that faith.

Anselm of Canterbury, one of the great writers of the medieval church in England, helps us understand this. He reminds us that all we have is actually from God, our health, our money, our life, all the blessings in our lives come original from God. So no matter how much we give back, no matter how much "good" we do in our lives, all we are doing is giving God back what originally is God's. Anselm explains that for this reason all we can do is rely on God and God's grace to be justified. Just as in the Gospel reading from last week, where the widow could not get the justice she needed by her own strength, rather she got it through the Judge.

This makes our reading from the second letter to Timothy make more sense. The first time I read that passage, I was thinking ok, how does this passage relate to the Gospel reading. Did we not just hear Jesus telling us not to boast about all our accomplishments? And here we find Paul boasting about his achievements, how he has "fought the good fight, [he has] finished the race, [he has] kept the faith (2Tim 4:7)." And we find him also proclaiming that he is now going to receive the "crown of righteousness (2Tim 4:8)."

Paul is not really boasting but rather he is proclaiming the ways that God has aided him along his journey. He is telling us that it all was through the grace of God that he was able to achieve all of what he was able to do. Because even when there was no other help, God was there to help him. Paul assures us that this help, and even this "crown of righteousness" can be obtained on that last day by all who long for God, just as the Tax collector longed for God's mercy.

In this life, God entrusts to each of us different gifts. These gifts are varied, but as Anselm reminds us, we are obliged to take care of these gifts and return them back to God. They are not ours to keep, but they are ours to care for.

This morning we join with different faith communities as we recognize one of these gifts. We are joining The Children's Defense Fund in giving voices to children who have no voice. We as a congregation will be invited shortly to pray for children. Children who are not being cared for, children who are hungry, children who are sick, children who cannot find love. We will pray for them, and ask God to help them, and help us discern how we are called to help them.

As a congregation, God calls us to care for the kids that have been entrusted to us. As a congregation, we will give our third graders the greatest gift a church can ever give. Can you guess what that gift is? Yes, it is the Bible, in a few minutes we will be giving each one of them their own personal Bible. But our responsibility does not end here, that is only the first step.

It is also our responsibility as a congregation, and your responsibility as parents to help our children read in the Bible, and learn more about it. It is our responsibility to make sure that that Bible does not sit on their desk, or on their bookshelf and collect dust, rather that they read in it every day. Through that reading and through their personal prayers, they can enter into a relationship with God.

It is also our duty to help them see the world as Christ has revealed it to us today, it is our responsibility to help them to understand what it means to humble ourselves before God. Through that act of humility, we recognize that it is through God's Grace that we keep our faith. It is through that act of humility we show our longing for God's presence. And that act of living in humility, will allow us on the last day to claim with Paul that we have finished the race and that we will receive the crown of righteousness that God has prepared for us.

Amen.