

October 23, 2016

PRAYER

Let the words of my mouth be mediations of our hearts, be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

SERMON

One of the things that Jesus's parables have in common is that he takes elements that are very familiar to the people and creates a story around them. But normally at the end of the story is an unexpected twist. And that is what we have in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Everybody knew and understood what a Pharisee was. Pharisee was someone who was very strict in his reading of the law, was very strict and his following of the law. He had a good sense of what the law was calling him to and how he should obey it including how to make the proper sacrifices, the proper fast twice a week, to give a tithe. He understood all this and quite frankly the normal Pharisee of the first century was probably pretty proud of the fact that he was following the law as he could. Without a lot of regard for those who didn't have the same means that he might have. And the ability to fulfill the law without it truly being a burden on his livelihood. And so, Jesus tells this parable and that's the Pharisee he presents. He goes to the temple, he prays, "I thank you God that I am not like these other people, not like the rogues, or the thieves, or the adulterers. I have my way to make my living and I'm proud of it. I thank you that I am able to give my tithes and to fast twice a week. I'm glad I'm not like even that tax collector."

Now for the people who are hearing the parable they were probably kind of nodding in agreement. This was a righteous man. He's doing what the law says he should do. And then in contrast to this very righteous Pharisee Jesus puts the tax collector. Now you have to understand that tax collecting in and of itself was not a sin. There were taxes that had to be paid. In the first century, if you were a tax collector from Romans you were breaking covenant because nationality and national adherence was the same as the religion. There was no difference. You couldn't be not a nationalist and still be one of the people of the covenant. They meshed together. It is not much unlike Israel today. It's not a democracy, it's a theocracy where the law of God and the law of the country are the same. And so even though the man, we don't know where he came from, we don't know what his upbringing was, we don't know how poor he might have been, we only know that he has chosen to be a tax collector for the Roman servants.

And this in the eyes of the Pharisee certainly and in the eyes of most of the people of the covenant it was being a traitor to your country and to your God. And so, he was a notorious sinner. So, we have a very stark contrast. We have a righteous Pharisee. We have the notorious sinner the tax collector. And Jesus has the tax collector standing far off not going up close to the altar area and he's beating his breast asking God to have mercy on me, a sinner. Now the twist comes in when Jesus says, "I tell you it is that man who went to his house justified." That's quite a twist. Everyone who was listening to Jesus tell the story was ready to hear why the Pharisee was correct, why he was righteous, and knew it and was happy about it. Even proud of it. That he was not like this notorious sinner. But they heard instead that it was the sinner who asked for mercy, who is justified. What's going on here? What is Jesus saying? What is Jesus saying to us?

I think one of the most important things is Jesus is saying when it comes to approaching God and when it comes to righteousness, it's not contest. It's not about how you are closer to being righteous than someone else, to compare yourself with someone who's not on the same plane, not on the same field as you are. We don't know what the background was for the tax collector. We know that for some reason he decided he needed to take this position with the Romans, maybe it was to provide for his family, maybe it was to find a way to get rich. We are not told that he was taking more taxes than he should, we're not told that he was squeezing the people so that he could have more money for himself while still giving to the Romans what they were demanding.

On the other hand, we don't hear much about the Pharisee either. We don't hear what his sin was. Seen and heard the scripture, none are righteous before God. If you don't believe that, read the book of Job again. None of us are righteous before God and yet in comparison with this notorious sinner, he was feeling awfully good about himself. But what was going on in his life? What was the sin of his life that we're not told about that he won't confess to God? On the other hand, we're not told that the tax collector is asking mercy for being a tax collector. He doesn't say that woe is me I'm a terrible sinner because I'm a tax collector and I repent from that, turn away from that, I'm going to give all that up, I'm going to live my life in poverty or whatever his life was before in order to have the mercy of God. He simply asks for the mercy of God. I wonder if he has come to the temple and asking for mercy not because he's a tax collector but because of his own knowledge of who he was and the broken relationship that he had with God. Because we all have broken relationship with God.

We all are separated from God because of our own desires, because of what we do and what we don't do. You know we recognize that in our worship every Sunday. We have this thing called the general confession and we stand or kneel together. Some of you sit, I've seen you. But we confess that we have sinned against God and we use the plural for that. We have sinned against God. Because it's not a matter of you sin more than I did or I sin more than you did. We all together are saying we have sinned and only you and God know what that sin is. Only me and God know what my sin is. Sometimes it's things that I've done, sometimes it's things I've left undone. But it is a recognition that I'm not the righteous person that I was created to be, that I'm called to be, or even that I want to be. But it is also a recognition that God will forgive that, that God can and does forgive that. And it is the intention to go away from this place forgiven. It is the intention to go from this place to do better. To not neglect what I am called to do as a follower of Jesus Christ. To not do things that I shouldn't do because I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. Isn't that what Jesus is trying to get that audience and us to see? That recognition of who we are as we stand before God. Not compare to anybody else but me and God, face to face. God knowing my life and my heart and me trying to understand how I have gone astray from God.

Very first prayer that we do when we gather together for the Eucharist is an acknowledgement that God knows the secrets of our hearts. There is nothing hidden till when we get to the point of that confession, it is again an acknowledgement of that. That God knows my sins even more than I do. Because sometimes even I am not aware of when I neglect to do things and it hurts others, hurts relationship. But when I do things that have again damaged relationship. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to do all that we can to acknowledge, to come to know God and what God wants for us. The joy of life, the relationship of love between ourselves and God, and between each other. But we also acknowledge as we come to this place that we are a sinner, that we come to receive forgiveness, and to be reminded that we are called to offer forgiveness to others. None of us stand before God as

righteous individuals. We all stand condemned by our own actions and yet we ask for, pray for, beg for the forgiveness of God. And the good news is that God gives that forgiveness and he sends us out to try again. To do better, to love more, to be at peace, to offer justice and mercy. Not in comparison am I doing it better or worse than somebody else. But to stand before God and say here I am. I'm doing the best that I can, help me to do better.