

Scripture Readings:

Joel 2:23-32

Luke 18:9-14

Righteous Faith

This week's lessons are all about judgment: the judgment of God, our judgments of others, our judgment of ourselves, and our hope that God will judge us gently and receive us with love. Along the path, we are invited to think about the end of our age, even the end of the world as we have known it (which may be the same thing). All along the way, however, we are told by prophet and Christ that the humble path is ever the best one.

Joel opens with God's pledge that rain will pour down, shattering the drought — and that is a sign of the pouring out of God's Spirit, God's *ruah*, the holy breath, wind, onrushing, transforming presence. When this unfolds, the old will dream dreams, the young will see visions. When we are younger we tend to dream big dreams. I wonder if some of that just lost along the way for most of us. We age and become cynical, crusty, maybe honoured ourselves as “realistic.” The problem is when we only focus on the facts we forget that church is about dreaming and visioning. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us to dream — not our private fantasies, but to share in God's dreams, which we know from God's past activity, from Scripture, and from an attentiveness on our part to what new thing God might be doing. Church reform begins in the dreams of God's people.

I have been thinking lately that this would be a very good practice. To share our dreams as a congregation to share God's dreams for one another. Feel free anytime to email or text me your dreams for our congregation.

Still this text isn't all about beautiful dreams is it. It starts out lovely and abundant and refreshing and then come the difficult piece of the story that most of us are not prepared for. Joel says if you don't act in faith now “The moon will turn to blood!” The prophetic way is irritating to the status quo and requires much courage. Joan Chittister's new book, *The Time is Now*, explains how the prophets “chose courage. They chose the expansion of the soul. They chose to stake their lives on what must be rather than stake their comfort, their security on what was.” Indeed, dreams can be squelched by fear and the drive for security. But as Scott Bader-Saye explains (in *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*), “We fear excessively when we allow the avoidance of evil to trump the pursuit of the good... Our overwhelming fears need, themselves, to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things.” Joel calls for a new and different world. He commands us not to give up because it gets hard and scary. It's not about salvation of yourself the call to faith is one for the whole world and if you give up because it gets too hard the consequences are devastating for all of creation.

Joel promises “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” — but the verb in question, *yimmalet*, means “will escape,” namely from the Babylonians or the latest military juggernaut scorching the earth and slaughtering the young. Hans Walter Wolff is right: “The

pouring out of God's spirit upon flesh means the establishment of new, vigorous life through God's unreserved giving of himself to those who, in themselves, are footless and feeble."

Many congregations today they are celebrating Reformation day.

Reformation Day is a Protestant Christian religious holiday celebrated on the 31 of October, alongside All Hallows' Eve (Halloween), in remembrance of the onset of the Reformation.

According to Philip Melanchthon, 31 October 1517 was the day German monk Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Electorate of Saxony in the Holy Roman Empire. It is regarded as the start of the Reformation alongside the nailing of the Ninety-five Theses/grievances to All Saints' Church's door on the same date.

The holiday is a significant one for both Lutheran and Calvinist Churches, although other Protestant communities also tend to commemorate the day. If we think back to *the* Reformation, in the 16th century, the rediscovery of mercy, grace, and faith-over-showy works is at the heart of what sets the church back on its feet after stumbling. As we consider our human brokenness and our inability to be what we so desperately dream of being for God.

Today's gospel is one of Jesus' most profound exposures of human spirituality gone bad. The righteous one not only trusts in himself; in his praying he is really only talking with himself! Very pious, but entirely secular if "secular" is whenever we see meaning within the self instead of beyond the self. Luther's own despair, in striving to be holy enough, to be righteous enough, is perhaps well-depicted in the shameless plea of the tax collector who cannot even raise his eyes. Humility is faith; humility is the need and reception of grace; mercy requires nothing but humility. This despairing humility is faith which stands as the answer to so many of our debates about who's right and who's wrong in the church, who's worthy of the church's blessings and who isn't.

We want to be cautious about romanticizing Luther's nailing of his 95 theses to the Wittenberg door for two reasons. It's a heroic image, but it was about a grievous division in God's Church, with anti-Catholic overtones. How do we rightly reform without dividing and injuring brothers and sisters in the Body? Secondly, Luther's theses were a vicious verbal assault with ferocious accusations and name-calling, which persisted through the supposedly 'holy' Reformation.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector makes for a great Reformation Day text. But it is not an easy text to preach. The moral of this story is so clear. Don't think too highly of yourself like this hypocritical Pharisee; rather, be like the self-abasing tax collector. Or, to make it even simpler, "be humble."

But here's the thing: whenever a parable seems clear, and simple, and straightforward, I figure we'd better not trust it. The author of the gospel of Luke is the master of reversals. So let's take a closer look.

"Two men went up to the Temple to pray," the parable begins, and then ends a few verses later by concluding, "And one went down to his home justified." In between is a story that most of us find pretty straightforward. One of the two men is pretty confident of himself. He is a Pharisee, one who has devoted his life to his faith and to his synagogue. His prayer, we know both immediately and intuitively, should not be our prayer: "Dear God, I thank you that I am not like

other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.” It seems haughty, even arrogant, and more than a tad self-righteous.

Now, the tax collector he refers to is also in the Temple praying, but he stands at a distance from the Pharisee, away from the centre where people normally gather. His prayer is quite different. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” This is the one, Jesus says, who returned to his home justified. And there you have it, the moral of the story: don’t be proud or arrogant like the Pharisee, but instead humble like the tax collector. Easy-peasy.

Except... except that the Pharisee is actually right. He is not like other people. He is not a thief or a trouble-maker or an adulterer. He is definitely not like the tax collector, someone who worked for the Romans, actually collecting taxes from his fellow Jews that helped pay for the Roman army’s occupation of Israel. In fact, when the Pharisee goes on, we realize he’s not just right, but actually righteous: “I fast twice a week,” he says, “And I give a tenth of my income.”

To be righteous, according to the Bible, is to live your life in accord with the law of Israel. The better you are at keeping the law, the more righteous you are. Now, we don’t use the word “righteous” that much anymore, but we could easily translate it as “successful.” If you are good at investment banking, you are righteous according to the standards of Wall Street. If you’re popular at school, we might say you are socially righteous. In the Pharisee’s case, he is successful at keeping the law of Israel. So this Pharisee is both right – he is not like other people – and righteous – he has been very successful at living his faith. But he is not, Jesus says, justified.

So if the Pharisee speaks the truth and he *is* righteous. What, then, is his problem? “It narrows down to one thing: while he is right about the kind of life he should live, he is confused about the source of that life. For while he prays to God, his prayer finally is about himself, and because he misses the source of his blessing, he despises those people God loves. For this reason, he leaves the Temple as righteous according to the law as when he entered, but he is not justified; that is, he is not accounted and called righteous and by God. For it would never occur to him to ask.”¹

The tax-collector, on the other hand, is pretty much the opposite. He is a failure at keeping the law. He has pretty much nothing to boast about. No one looks at him as a success and no one would call him righteous. Far from it, most of his neighbours – off of whom he makes his living – probably despise him. And he knows this, and so he stands at the edge of the Temple – or, if he were here today, sits at the very back of the church – and won’t even lift his eyes toward heaven but simply asks for mercy. This is the one, Jesus says, who is justified.

Jesus once again messes with our expectations. “For there is no note of repentance in the tax collector’s speech, no pledge to leave his employment or render restitution to those he has cheated, no promises of a new and better life. Nothing, except the simple acknowledgment that

he is utterly and entirely dependent on God's mercy. The tax collector knows the one thing the Pharisee does not: his life is God's -- his past, present, and future entirely dependent on God's grace and mercy.

Which is, of course, what the Reformation was all about. Luther realized first and foremost that if *anything* about his salvation rested on his ability, character, or faith -- whether the good works and indulgences of the sixteenth-century or the earnest plea to "make a decision for Jesus" in the twenty-first -- he was lost. He could claim nothing other than God's good favour.

Why? Because while righteousness is about what we accomplish, about our success, to be justified is to be called or counted righteous no matter what we have done simply because God says so. It's a bit like when my children disobey, or are unkind to each other, they are neither successful nor righteous. And yet they are still loved, still our children, still the most important people in the world to Macky and I. They may not, in these moments, be acting in lovable ways, yet we love them anyway. And if we, who are far from perfect parents, can manage this, then how much more does God.

And so in this parable the Pharisee leads a blameless life and for this reason is righteous. The tax collector does not lead a blameless life but asks God for mercy, asks God to look at him and judge him not based on what he has done but instead to look at him and judge him based on who God is -- compassionate, loving, and merciful.

And that is the point, it's about grace and mercy and compassion. Because the minute you decide to take this parable to heart and "be humble" it's pretty hard not to also be grateful you're not like that Pharisee. And then the trap has sprung. It's not about you, you see. Not your humility or lack of pride. It's not about you; it's about God.

But there's another trap in the parable as well. And that's to hear in the tax collector's confession an example that we also ought to live our lives fully and entirely aware of our status as a sinner. But the minute you do that, you've also shifted attention away from God's activity to your status. And the trap is sprung one more time. Once again, it's not about you -- not about you being a sinner or a wretch or one who does not deserve or merit God's grace or however you might want to formulate it. It's just not about you; it's about God.

This parable -- and indeed the whole Reformation -- was and is an attempt to shift our attention from ourselves -- our piety or our passions, our faith or our failure, our glory or our shame -- to God, the God who delights in justifying the ungodly, welcoming the outcast, and healing all who are in need."² Righteousness, success, is never enough. Why? Because it's based on our abilities and accomplishments. And we will eventually fall short. Even more, it's based on comparisons. Notice: righteousness and success are always measured relative to how the people around us are doing. The Pharisee can't escape this, and neither can we. This kind of comparison and success

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driven approach to life is so deeply ingrained in our society we don't even know how not to do it anymore.

Just ask Essena O'Neil. By the time Essena, a native of Australia, was eighteen, she had more than 200,000 followers on YouTube and a half million on Instagram. And then she quit. She vacated the social media space that had made her a star, explaining in a final Instagram post why. She was, in every possible way, successful, even righteous, across multiple social media platforms. And yet as she described, it was not enough, precisely because it was based on comparisons. "Without realizing [it]," she wrote on a final Instagram post, "I've spent the majority of my teenage life being addicted to social media, social approval, social status, and my physical appearance." "Social media," she continued, "especially how I use it, isn't real. It's contrived images and edited clips... [always] ranked against each other. It's a system based on social approval, likes, validation in views, success in followers. It's perfectly orchestrated self-absorbed judgment." Success, Essena discovered, is based solely on what we can achieve and has its roots in comparing ourselves to others, is never enough.

Success, righteousness is never enough because no matter what we accomplish, no matter how successful or righteous we are, there's always more. Always more we could have done, always someone who's done more or has more or will do more. And so there's always a sense of doubt? How do we know we're good enough, rich enough, successful enough, pretty enough, popular enough, have good enough grades.... How do we know, in other words, whether we're righteous enough?

Which means the secret to being a Christian – and maybe to being a person – is not to strive to be righteous or humble, not successful or a failure, not rich or poor, not any of the things we can put on a scale and measure and compare, but instead to simply receive God's acceptance, love, and mercy. The secret of being a Christian – and maybe to being a person – is simply to recognize that you are always in need. No matter what you've done or not done, we all have needs, and the minute you recognize that you can ask God to meet them, giving up the hope of creating the perfect life yourself, giving up the need to compare ourselves to others, and instead just receive God's love and acceptance, like a child receives of the love of her parents. Because when you do that – when you recognize your need – you discover God has already called you righteous, and holy, and beloved, and perfect.³ And when we get that we will be able to dream God's dream together because we will remember it's God's dream not ours that pours the spirit of life upon us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

³ much of this sermon is adapted from "Never Enough" by David J. Lose A Sermon for Every Sunday Luke 18:9-14