

“The Grace of a Humble Spirit”
Luke 18:9-14

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a heart-felt story that challenges listeners to critically examine how we look at ourselves in relationship to God and neighbor, and to critically ponder how God and neighbor might look at us. I believe the argument can be made that the parable is as relevant today as it was the day Jesus told it. The world desperately needs more people who understand the grace of a humble spirit.

A good example, numerous candidates running for public office often speak in first person singular making outrageous and unreasonable claims saying, “I will do this,” or “I will do that” portraying the false hope that things will get done if we will only place our trust in the individual. It is an impossible task to get things done and work alone. Before Election Day, we should be listening for the candidates who invoke the pronoun “We.”

Every generation, in addition to this one, there are folks who place way too much trust in themselves while regarding others with contempt, Eugene Peterson steps into the picture and offers the following insight, “One way to define spiritual life is getting so tired and fed up with yourself you go on to something better, which is following Jesus.” A mistake that is sometimes made in the life of the Christian and the institutional life of the church is the mistake of thinking too highly one oneself or one’s particular tradition. As Presbyterians we are only one of many, and the many make the one.

It was at Montreat, NC that the well-known Bible scholar Dale Brunner addressed the faith of the Psalmist who writes, “For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.” (Psalm 138:8) Brunner made a stunning observation, “What the world needs is people with a good dose of low self-esteem.” We don’t need another Certificate or Letter of Appreciation, a fancy ribbon or gold medal showering us with affirmation that tells us how good we are. The book of the Apocalypse reminds us that our hands are always capable of evil and therefore we should never avoid looking at ourselves with a realistic eye.

In reference to the morning Psalter, blessed is the person who understands the gravity of sin, the words and actions that separate us from God and neighbor, who recognizes the Lord as the hope of the earth, and when morning dawns and evening fades, lifts a voice in a song of joy. (Psalm 65)

The gospel of Luke suggests that as people surrounded Jesus, Jesus watched and listened, and the Teacher observed behavior that was condescending and self-righteous. The ninth verse of the eighteenth chapter tells us that Jesus told this parable to “some” of his disciples, NOT to all of them. We have no idea who the people were that the gospel identifies as “some,” which serves as an important lesson that maybe should not be overlooked or easily discarded. And you ask, “What might that lesson be?”

The lesson might be that expressions of piety and faith are good, powerful signs that one is a follower of Christ, but they are not the means to an end and they can also serve as a lethal trap for the person who believes they have made it to the finish line as opposed to all of the other people who are frequently categorized as moral failures.

One of the theological strengths of the Reformed tradition which is not always popular with the masses is the realistic view of our humanity. In as much as we may be good and do good, we are always one step away from making a mistake that defies our devotion to Jesus and our commitment to the gospel, and this is one of the reasons we are strongly encouraged to follow the tradition of Jesus who made a place for rest and worship, self-reflection and prayer in his life.

Every Sunday, we do the same thing that we did the week before and the simple act of worship within the context of community serves a valuable purpose. When we give ourselves in the name of Jesus Christ to Abba Father, offering praise and thanksgiving, making confession and seeking mercy, only then can we receive grace and forgiveness, healing and wholeness. The difference between Saturday and Monday is that on Monday the Christian does not carry one's sins and mistakes from the week before. They have been lifted and erased as we greet and welcome the beginning of a new week, which leads me to share an additional thought.

It was a sunny afternoon during the recent evacuation, the little ones were napping, the grandsons fishing, and the adults relaxing, when I picked up a book that I had carried with me along with my Bible and Prayer Book. The words of the late Rev. Dr. George MacLeod captured my undivided attention and made me think about the present environment we live in along with the many problems of anxiety, feelings of being rushed, and having no time slowdown in order to love and play, to think and dream.

MacLeod was speaking to the people and Church of Scotland who were living in the last half of the 20th century. The Rev. Dr. made the audacious claim that people would suffer for the lack of Sabbath in their lives, for the loss of religious identity and involvement with a community of faith that we know as the church. MacLeod recognized reasons for the crisis. There was the tragedy of two horrendous World Wars, the growing division between the sacred and secular, the growing confidence in the power and influence of science to the total disregard of faith and theology, and the daily witness of how Christians often look at one another with contempt.

In closing, it is not my wish to leave you with a dismal picture of the future. New beginnings always begin with confession, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus is able to work with people who live and emulate the grace of a humble spirit. In the words of Father Richard Rohr, "The body can live without food easier than the soul can live without meaning." Jesus Christ is our Lord, he is our Redeemer and Savior, and he is the one who ultimately gives meaning for our life and death. Only the person with a humble spirit can believe such a bold statement and affirmation of faith, and live with a fresh spirit filled with joy and hope. Amen.