

The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
October 23, 2016
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

Receiving Grace

Create in me a clean heart O' God and renew a right spirit within me, Amen.

When you got up this morning, each of you made a decision to come to church. Most assuredly you had other options: to linger over the paper and a cup of coffee, to attend the scheduled soccer game, to catch a few more minutes of coveted sleep. I ask you to take a moment and think about why you put aside those other choices to gather in this place.

Some might say because it is meet and right so to do on a Sunday morning, to give thanks and praise to God. Others might believe in the importance of community and how good it is to worship with your spiritual family. Maybe you are here because of a commitment to a ministry or perhaps you have come because you need a word of hope and encouragement. Whatever your reason for showing up, it is good to remember that God draws us near so that we may receive grace. The question our Gospel story evokes this morning is whether or not we believe we are in need of God's grace.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is one more story of reversal that Jesus uses to demonstrate the upside down values of the kingdom of God. It begins like a good joke, a Pharisee and tax collector appear at the temple at the same time to pray. But Jesus uses the pillar of the Jewish community, the Pharisee, who follows the letter of the law, to exemplify one who has missed the religious boat. The Pharisee's vision is turned inward and focused upon all the ways he has been obedient to the rules and pious in his actions. He justifies himself before God. He asks for nothing and receives nothing.

Now the tax collector was a despised Jew who collaborated with the Romans to cheat the poor and innocent out of their savings. He could not even bring himself to go near the temple, but beat his breast and begged for God's mercy. The tax collector received the mercy and reconciliation he asked for. One made a claim to righteousness based upon his own accomplishments, while the other relied upon God's benevolence. Jesus points to faith being a matter of the heart's condition, not a to-do list. Is this a cautionary tale against arrogance? Is it a lesson about faith and humility?

Consider the impact this parable must have had on its original audience. The Pharisees could have perceived this teaching as yet another offense against the sacred law. I imagine the furious religious leaders believed that Jesus was a heretic who must be stopped, for the good of the community. But those who lived on the margins, the poor, the outcast, sinners and thieves may have heard this as a word of hope: that God's grace is given to all who ask for it, if their hearts are ready to receive.

As a church goer and rule follower, this parable gives me pause. We too, might pay attention to the condition of our hearts. What motivates our prayer life and our faith disciplines? What undergirds our impulse for service? Does doing for others put me on the right side of the power differential? How easy it is to measure our goodness by the things we do, and not by what fills our heart. If ministry does not emanate from what we have received from God, like the Pharisee, we might begin to believe that we are the source of mercy and blessing and judgement. Acknowledging our own brokenness keeps us from setting ourselves apart from others that are

hurting and broken. Practicing humility not only grounds us in our collective need for God, it places us in solidarity with those who are truly powerless.

I am reminded of a story of a pastor who disguised himself as a homeless person and went to the 10,000 member church where he was to be introduced that morning, as the head pastor. He walked around his soon to be church, for 30 minutes while it was filling with people for service. Only 3 people acknowledged him. He went into the sanctuary to sit down in the front of the church and was asked by the ushers if he would please sit in the back. He greeted people and was met with stares and silence. As the new pastor was introduced that day, the elders of the church, who were in on this scheme, asked everyone to greet their new pastor. The homeless man got up and claimed the microphone. He began to describe what he had experienced that morning. Now I don't know if this story is true and I can't even imagine such a brash introduction into a new church family. But this illustration reminds us that even the church can miss the boat by claiming its own righteousness, setting itself apart, creating an "us and them" mentality. Acknowledging our brokenness reminds us of our need for God and for one another.

Abraham Lincoln wrote this in a proclamation about prayer: *We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have imagined, in our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!*

As we gather in this place this morning, I invite you to open your hearts and hands to receive God's redeeming grace. During the confession, in the moment of silence, examine your heart for the ways you need healing and mercy. Recite the words of confession with humility and contrition. At the peace, greet your brothers and sisters with a warm embrace of our mutual humanity. Open your hands at communion to receive and be renewed. And in your song, praise the God who blesses you so that you can become a blessing to others. Then leave this place with a full heart to share with a hurting world.

My friends, as this community embarks upon a new season of its story, let it be one of deepening awareness of the connection that brings us life, inspiration and the desire to serve. Let this be a year of awakening to our need for God and for one another. And as our broken places are healed, may we always acknowledge the source of our blessing, God's abundant grace, which is available to all who will ask and receive it. Thanks be to God. Amen.