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Luke 18: 9-14

We Stand Before God

Our scripture text this morning comes directly after our text from last week – which was the parable of the persistent widow, who eventually, after badgering the corrupt judge day after day, wore him down so he finally delivered her justice.

And now, Jesus has barely taken a breath (okay, this is just how I imagine it, but it’s more fun to add the drama so bear with me…) Jesus has BARELY drawn breath after finishing that story; when he looks around and notes more than a few people who are looking mighty pleased with themselves. Smug, even you might say.

Folks who are so certain that they were righteous that they look down on everyone.

You see, they listened to the end of that first parable and decided something about themselves.

And don’t worry, since I don’t like to guilt people for missing church – I won’t ask if you know how the last parable ended, I’ll just tell you!

After telling the parable about the persistent widow, Jesus asks one question:

“But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?”

Meaning, with anyone be as faithful as the widow in her pursuit of justice??

And the answer, obviously, for those certain, rather smug, folks listening is, “Yes! Obviously.”

Of course, Jesus will find faithful people when he returns!

Because look at us: we are dogged in our pursuit of justice, we are perfect in our faith, we have all the reason in the world to feel secure and good about ourselves as upright, religious folk.

We will be the good faithful when Jesus returns.

And it’s then, right then, that Jesus flips the tables.

He sees those people, looking mighty self-righteous, and he tells this parable for them.

I’m reading from Luke, chapter 18:

9Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust:

10“Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’

13But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ 14I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee.

All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

Will you pray with me?

Gracious God – let us be courageous enough to stand before you as we truly are: beautiful, broken, worthy, imperfect humans. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So, church – what does this second parable have to tell us?

Last week’s hammered home the importance of persistent faith – of praying often and hard – so that when God shows up, as God WILL, we will be ready to see Her in our midst.

And this week’s?

Well, I think it’s a reminder that when we show up in relationship with God, we are called to show up fully as ourselves – imperfect, vulnerable, and honest.

Charles Cousar, a New Testament scholar says it well,

“Prayer is the occasion for honesty about oneself and generosity about others.”

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That’s the message of this parable.

Prayer is a time for honesty. It’s a time for truth-telling.

God can handle all of it. Our messy lives, our illnesses, our losses, our failures, our joys.

All of it – because that’s what makes us human. And makes us God’s beloved.

But because I believe prayer works on our own hearts, as much as it reaches out to God, prayer is also a time when we practice generosity and compassion for others.

It’s a time to stop the comparisons that our success-driven culture nurtures.

It’s a time to examine ourselves, not to place ourselves above or below others.

It’s a time to get real.

Because it is in the moments we stand before God authentically – when we admit we don’t have all the answers, that we can’t fix all the problems, that we can’t do it all by ourselves –

it is in those moments God shows up.

I do believe we have to make space for God in our lives, because if we’re so sure we’ve got it all handled, I kinda think God lets us pretend it’s true for a while.

We don’t think we need God, so we stop looking for God.

And then we stop seeing God.

The Pharisee didn’t think he needed God so much – he had things pretty well handled – even his faith was well taken care of without God’s help.

But the tax collector? He was desperate. He knew he needed God to show up and show him mercy.

And God did. Because that’s what God does.

One of the things I really love about Anne Lamott’s book is that those three prayers – “Help, Thanks, Wow” are kind of where our spirits naturally lead us, if we’re at all inclined to pray.

Think of the prayers you know.

Thomas Merton’s Prayer for Guidance? – help

Our opening prayer today? Thanks!

The prayer I say whenever the mountain is out? – Wow. It’s more of an exhale, than audible word, but I’m pretty sure it still counts.

However, if there was a prayer I’d add to Lamott’s book, it’d be “I’m sorry.”

Because that’s a prayer we all need practice at. Practice in saying it to God and saying it to others.

That’s what the tax collector is doing.

He’s offering a prayer of confession in the hopes of God’s forgiveness.

And rightfully so.

Tax collectors were not innocent members of Jewish society. They were instruments of economic oppression yielded by the Roman Empire.

They were on the wrong side of everything in their society – politically, religiously and economically.

“Prayer is an occasion for honesty about oneself and generosity about others.”

When we stand before God, we should do so honestly.

And the tax collector does.

The Pharisee? He may well have too to an extent. I’m sure he did fast twice a week and give a tenth of everything he received. No clergy tax-free/tithing free housing allowance for this guy!

The issue with the Pharisee’s prayer?

He uses it to judge others. To place himself above and apart from others. To pat himself on the back for his own righteousness and good works.

And that doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for God or God’s grace.

For God’s transformative power.

If we’re going to be changed by prayer, we have to open ourselves to the possibility that we need changing. That we in fact, may be, a work in progress.

A work in progress does not make us any less worthy – any less beautiful – any less lovable in God’s eyes.

It makes us human. Works in progress.

Brené Brown writes,

“Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It’s going to bed at night thinking, Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love.”

God loves you.

God desires a relationship with you.

A real, honest relationship.

And prayer is one of the ways we cultivate that relationship.

Prayers of gratitude, prayers of wonder, prayers seeking help, prayers of confession.

All of these are ways of entering into relationship.

Honest relationship with ourselves, with God, and with others.

The first and only cardinal rule about prayer is to bring your authentic self to it.

Okay – so, that’s my cardinal rule. I’m pretty sure the Pope hasn’t made that a rule.

But I believe Jesus would tell us the same thing.

Pray often.

Pray without ceasing.

And pray honestly. Tell God what is on your heart, on your mind, the things that are resting heavy on your spirit.

If you need healing, pray for healing.

If you need forgiveness, pray for forgiveness.

If you want to say thank you or wow – pray that!

It’s that easy. It’s that difficult.

Prayer is a time to get honest with and about yourself.

Of course, you know, prayer isn’t a divine vending machine. Your prayers may not be answered how you want – in fact, it may seem like your prayers are never answered at all.

But I believe if you keep it up, or more importantly, if you open yourself up, you may in fact, find yourself transformed.

Prayer won’t necessarily bring back someone you’ve lost.

It won’t undo a hurt or wound from the past.

But prayer may just help you see a new way forward.

It may help you to trust, to love, to heal, to find joy again.

And when life is good, when life is beautiful – remember to mark that with prayer too. Because it will help you be more fully present to it as it comes. Because life is always changing – our worlds are always shifting.

Friends, prayer is one of the many ways we enter into the grace of God.

And we all depend on the grace of God.

Whether or not we’re willing to admit it. And some days, we depend on it a whole lot. Because it’s all we have to hold onto.

And when we admit that, to ourselves and to God, grace can come flooding in.

Two parables stand side by side.

The persistent widow beating down the door for justice.

And the repentant tax collector.

Both stand honestly before God.

In anger, in sorrow, calling for justice, asking for forgiveness.

Both are shown the face of God.

God is just, God is merciful, God is righteous, God is steadfast in love.

And we humans bear the image of the divine, but we are imperfect images.

And that’s okay. That’s good. Because our imperfections, our failures, our sins make space for God and for the grace of God to show up and transform our lives.

So, let us stand together before God. Imperfect, authentic, joyful, broken, exhausted, beloved, worthwhile human beings.

Not one of us above the other – all of us in need of God’s grace.

Amen.