

<Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65:1-13; Luke 18:9-14>

Before I get to our gospel reading this morning, I would share with you that, for as much as it is refreshing to get away for a week, it is good to come back to all of you. I appreciate what has become the common sharing of our lives, our joys and sorrows, our griefs and celebrations, and our expectations and hopes within this community of faith. I enjoy sharing with you things that are giving me joy and life and hearing the same from you. For instance, while I know it may not be the music that some of you listen to, Megan and I were able to go to see the band Mumford & Sons recently when they played downtown. For me, going to see them is an expectant hope waiting to be fulfilled, and like a kid in mid-December, I found it harder and harder to concentrate the closer the concert came.

And I was most hopeful to hear them play a song from their second album, released in 2013, which is one of the first songs I ever heard of theirs. It's the song that helped me connect to them in the first place, and continues to hold a place within the fibers of my being. Entitled *I Will Wait*, the lyrics of the song echo a yearning within the individual, a hope that they dare not expect to see realized but which they cannot help but voice.

*"Well, I came home like a stone, and I fell heavy into your arms. These days of dust, which we've known, will blow away with this new sun...But I'll kneel down, wait for now; and I'll kneel down, know my ground..."*

When I first heard these lyrics over a decade ago, they didn't quite sink in. The music caught my spirit, but the words simply washed over me. It wasn't until further listening and hearing that I realized the hoped-for outcomes and yearning being expressed within the song, the desire for something dreamed of but perhaps forever unrealized. And I recognized, in this, a truth of our gospel promise, as well, one which speaks to the very nature of the Kingdom of God.

It's a common and frequent question in the life of faith, reflecting the desire of humanity to know and understand the fullness of the Kingdom of God. For instance, our gospel reading this morning is found within a grouping of sayings of Jesus, all of which have their beginning in the question, not from the disciples but from the Pharisees, to learn more about the Kingdom of God. Asked, even perhaps cynically, when to expect the Kingdom and how to know it was arrived, Jesus instead responds with parables that showcase the presence of the Kingdom of God not as a grand restoration of a specific location in the future but as the living into of a restored heart in the here and now. In short, Jesus is proclaiming, the arrival of the Kingdom of God comes with the realization that the Kingdom of God already dwells within each of us, and our lives are bent according to its presence.

From Luke's gospel: "[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves,

rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.' "

These are the Words of the Lord; thanks be to God.

We see in this parable a fundamental shift in the way humanity views and recognizes the Kingdom of God. It is similarly shown in other parables and teachings, but focusing on this one we see this shift evident in the uplifting of the one who is humble, is not braggadocios but honest, and who recognizes that mercy and fulfillment come from God and not from self-efforts. In short, recognizing the presence of the Kingdom of God comes from the pouring out of one's own self-aggrandizing and reliance of self-works to make room for the work of God to be poured in.

Because, in practice, the Pharisee does nothing wrong. He goes to the Temple to pray - check. He keeps himself ritually clean and separated from those who might otherwise undermine those efforts - check. He fasts regularly - check. He offers a full tithe of his income - check. In terms of practice, the Pharisee has it nailed to a "t." He has every justification to think that he is living into God's presence, and that when the Kingdom of God arrives, it will arrive for him. And before we apply this misguided mindset only to the Pharisee of the parable, or to the Pharisees in general, we should remember that it has been common to humanity throughout our recorded history.

This Sunday, the last Sunday of October, is when we in the Presbyterian world remember and mark the anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. This was the movement that stemmed from the response against the prevalent thinking in the church that an individual could earn or buy their way into righteousness and forgiveness through their own works, rather than by the grace of God alone.

The people of God hearing from the prophet Joel were similarly in a position of believing that only those who met all the criteria of purity and acceptance would be able to see the spirit of God realized. And yet, as Joel proclaims from our reading this morning, when God restores the fortunes of the land and the people, it will be a restoration for all people. "Then afterward," Joel proclaims on behalf of God, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh...then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Not by our own merits or efforts, but *sola gratia*, by the grace of God alone.

It has been a common pitfall throughout history for humanity to attempt to earn, buy, or otherwise make ourselves worthy of the Kingdom of God through our own efforts. But if we can not buy or earn the grace of God, what can humanity do? What can we do?

For a fundamental answer, a starting point, we turn back to our parable this morning. The Pharisee sees himself as righteous, and ticks off the reasons why. But the other man in the parable, the tax collector, has a differing view of himself. As Jesus describes,

"Standing far off, [he] would not even lift his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'"

Now, I am not standing here today advocating that we each need to start staring forlornly at the floor tiles and beating our own breasts and yelling more loudly than our neighbors how much of a sinner we may be. Again, that would be an attempt through an action to gain favor or mercy. But I would lift up the simple fact that this tax collector emptied himself of anything he had done or left undone, in order to make room for God to do what God would do. The tax collector poured out his own ego and sense of self in order to be filled with what God would place there - mercy, grace, rightness and justification.

But God cannot place those things within us if we have not made room to receive them. If we hold on to our own sense of deserving and entitlement, then we can never fully live into who God would have us be, and the Kingdom of God will be hidden from us. We must allow God to realize for us and for the world what we cannot realize for ourselves.

It is what we yearn for - this fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and our spirits' desire. It is why we try so hard to accomplish and achieve it ourselves; we want so much to see it realized. Yet it is not ours to claim, only to receive from the One who would truly and freely, lovingly give.

That song I mentioned from Mumford & Sons, *I Will Wait*, gives the impression of a desire that is out of reach of being realized, a desire unknown. But at the end, that changes, and you can hear the depth of joy reflected in the lyrics.

*"Raise my hands; paint my spirit gold. Bow my head and keep my heart slow...I will wait for you."*

This is the same spirit of the tax collector, recognizing it is only through God's mercy that his hopes can be fulfilled and the Kingdom of God realized. This is the spirit of the prophets of God, Joel in particular, and of the Reformation, and of every moment in history in which we recognize that the joy and fullness of life we so long for is to be found in the grace of God, and is there waiting for us to realize, if only we will pour out our own selves so that God may pour into us.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*