

God of Mercy

sermon digest

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Luke 18:9-14
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On Ash Wednesday the church around the world began marking Jesus' journey to the cross. We journey together acknowledging our need for repentance and for God's mercy. Having been created to know communion with God, love for one another and oneness with creation, we know ourselves to be separated from God, our neighbors and creation. We gather, then, to the discipline of Lent – the discipline of self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love. We will journey together through the coming forty days, preparing our hearts as we go.

Perhaps you noticed these words on the front of our order of worship as you entered this morning. Perhaps you noticed and affirmed them, or perhaps you found yourself uncomfortable with them. It all depends on how you feel about their acknowledgment that things are not as they should be—their observation that we are separated from God, neighbor and creation and in need of repentance.

How do you experience the idea of a season of self-examination and repentance—a season that lasts more than five weeks, no less? If you recall religious experiences in earlier years when calls to repentance were a part of your steady diet, you may have some difficulty here. Although the church is where I experienced much affirmation and learned of a God of love during the years of my childhood and although it was there I saw God's love exemplified in the lives of supportive, gracious people who cared for me day after day, year after year, it was also there where I heard frightening messages of a God of judgment. It was there where I continually felt called to repentance and not just repentance but to self-effacement, and even self-degradation. Despite the church's warm embrace and its message of love and its call for us to reach for the stars in being all that we could be, the message from the pulpit was too often one that undercut that love and reduced us to a permanent state of insecurity and want before God.

As we have grown up, some have responded to those early childhood experiences with anger and have thrown God and the church out of their lives altogether. Others of us have encountered a different sort of God and committed ourselves to repairing the damage in ourselves and others. Freed from captivity at last, we have joined our broader culture in finding some humor in it. Many of us enjoyed laughing when Bea Arthur playing Maude used to issue her frequent warning to Walter, her husband: "God is going to get you for that!" And we laughed at Flip Wilson's flippant and oft repeated excuse, "The devil made me do it." The excesses of frontier style evangelism have had their day, and the idea of an angry, red-faced evangelist wagging his finger in our faces with the command to "Repent!" is pretty well beyond something we can take seriously. Larry recalls that when he was quite fresh in ministry, pastoring his first congregation, his new brother-in-law brought him what was in that day a very nice gift: a box of calling cards. On top, Jon had placed a single (thank goodness, only one) card with the word "Repent!" in broad red letters alongside Larry's contact information. Larry shuddered and breathed a sigh of relief when he thumbed through the rest of the box.

Still, the question comes to us: What do we do with Lent? What do we do with repentance? What do we do with Psalm 51 and Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, the passages we read this morning? Are there messages here that are relevant to us today? Messages that we still need to hear? Messages that do not take us back into the bad news gospel of our childhood but that acknowledge and deal with realities in our lives that we recognize as truth?

Too often we construct the story of repentance as the story of "us" against "them". Luke sets up a situation and in the process, gives us a key. Some gathered around Jesus, Luke says, "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (18:9). Jesus, as was often the case, sought to deal with the situation with a story. The two main characters—a Pharisee and a tax collector—would have been very familiar images to those gathered around. Both go up to the Temple to pray, and both tell the truth. The Pharisee, as we all have heard, really was a very righteous man, who went beyond what was required in living out his religious devotion to God. He was a man of honor. He was respected by all who knew him as one who didn't just talk the talk. He also walked the walk. Lest we be tempted to dismiss him for a "works righteousness" sense of salvation, we should rather, Professor Amy-Jill Levine tells us, see him as one who is faithfully seeking to live in light of God's covenant with the people Israel. The Pharisee is not trying to win heaven with his good works; he is doing good works in response to the God who has come first to him and all of Israel. He is doing his good works because that is how he understands God wants him to live. His problem resides in his negatively judging others [Short

The tax collector is also telling the truth. Standing far off and unable even to lift his head, he prays for mercy, for he knows himself to be “a sinner”. And he is. He is a traitor collecting taxes from his own people on behalf of the Roman Empire. Given the nature of the system, which, lacking any checks and balances, enabled collectors to extort whatever they could get, he is also probably a despicable cheat. Admittedly, we rush to clean him up; but notice what he does not do. He makes no promise of switching jobs. Unlike little Zacchaeus in the story Luke will tell in the next chapter, he indicates no plan for restitution of those he has cheated or for giving half of all he owns to the poor. He just confesses and goes home justified.

We tend to make him our hero. We tend to see him as one of us—as one of the plain, ordinary, humble folk who, when the tables of God’s kingdom are turned, will be “exalted”. He is one of us, unlike the Pharisee who is “one of them”. Over centuries of interpretation the church has waxed long and it has waxed hard on the supposed works righteousness of the Pharisees to the point that the word “Pharisee” has come to mean “hypocrite”. Even when we try to be more modern, more historically or ethnically sensitive, and rush to substitute other groups, we end up with something of a “self-congratulatory reading”. We come out, Lutheran Professor David Lose suggests with a prayer something like, “Lord, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or even like that Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to Scripture, and we have learned that we should always be humble” [“The Pharisee, the Tax Collector, and the Reformation,” Workingpreacher.com, October 21, 2013] .

The humorous story is told of two pastors who come to the church to pray. Falling on his knees, the first pastor cries out to God: “I have sinned. I am unworthy, I am unworthy, I am unworthy.” Then the second pastor falls on her knees, crying out, “I have sinned. I am unworthy, I am unworthy, I am unworthy.” Just then the janitor walks in, and observing the display of piety, joins the refrain: “I have sinned. I am not worthy, I am not worthy. I am not worthy.” The first pastor turns to the second and sneers, “Now look who thinks he’s unworthy!” [Audrey West, “One-Upmanship,” The Christian Century, 2007].

“Lord, I’m so proud to be humble” does not seem like the point of the parable. Nor does trying to outdo one another in groveling before God. Nor does afflicting our children with a lifetime of doubt and insecurity before an angry and threatening God. Where, then, should we focus?

The measure of God’s mercy is unlimited. The focus of the parable and the focus of our relationship to God are best shifted from ourselves to God. Rather than focusing upon ourselves—our sincerity and our humility, our piety and our passions, our faith and our failures, our glory and our shame—we should focus most of our thoughts, most of our time and efforts towards God. And God, David Lose reminds us, is just this sort of God:

the God who creates light from darkness, raises the dead to life, and pulls us all—Pharisees and tax collectors, righteous and sinful, disciples and ne’er-do-wells alike—into a realm of unimaginable and unexpected grace, mercy and joy [Ibid].

The God of covenant and the God portrayed by Jesus is not a God of limited mercy, limited grace, Levine reminds us [192]. Grace for one does not eliminate grace for another. We do not have to divide ourselves into encampments, one against the other as if God’s extension of grace to and through the Pharisees of the first century somehow limits God’s grace through Jesus then or now. Nor do we have to turn the tax collector into some poor victim, similar to excluded victims of our own time. He was not lacking in power, wealth or status. He was not sinned against, oppressed or marginalized. His problem was that he was a sinner, who showed no mercy for his fellow countrymen. The Temple welcomed him as it welcomed the Pharisee. He prayed, as did the Pharisee, and went home justified.

Lent is a time of self-reflection. It is a time of taking serious stock of the points at which we are separated from God, one another and creation. We do so, however, under the overarching umbrella of God’s abiding grace and love. We do so not as insecure, competitive children, fearful that there is not enough grace and forgiveness to go around. We do so knowing that we can be honest to God. We do so knowing that the prayer of our hearts will be met in abundant mercy by the God of steadfast love.

So hear this: If you grew up on a bad news gospel of an angry, threatening, unforgiving God, you grew up on a false god. You did not grow up on the God central to the faith of Israel or of Jesus Christ. When you get down to it, such a gospel is no laughing matter, although it is better to laugh at it than cringe before it. As many times as the condemnation of that gospel rings in your heart and mind, hear the good news: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. The God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, the God of our fathers and mothers hears your prayers and receives you in love.

So, do not feel you must enter this time of self-reflection and repentance with a sense of dread. Rather,

feel welcome to enter here bringing with you whatever darkness that haunts your soul or stalks this earth. Come in open honesty before the God of Creation, the God of boundless mercy and compassion. For it is just this God who receives you today, tomorrow, and forevermore. Thanks be to God!