

Worship for October 22, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;

For the Lord's steadfast love endures forever.

Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,
or declare all God's praise?

**Happy are those who observe justice,
who do righteousness at all times.**

*Hymn 475 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Prayer of Confession

**O God, who alone can probe the depths of the heart,
you hear the prayers of the faithful;
you justify the repentant sinner.**

**Grant us the gift of humility,
that we may see our sins clearly
and refrain from judging our neighbor.**

**We make our prayer through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.**

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

God pours out mercy and grace, never giving up on us, but freeing us to live lives worthy of our calling.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: Jesus Christ saves us from sin and sets us free to enjoy newness of life.

Know you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.

First Reading Joel 2: 23-32

Moments With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Luke 18:9-14

Morning Message

You may know that one of my favorite TV shows is Blue Bloods. At least once an episode we see the Reagan clan gathered around the Sunday dinner table hashing out the highs and lows of the week. There is a lot of mirth and sometimes, some deep and dark angst.

Dinner always begins with a blessing over the meal: “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from the bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Traditional Catholic table grace. If danger has come calling, if grief or loss is upon them, someone may add to the prayer that particular concern. Likewise, should there be a reason to celebrate, the prayer sounds much like a cheer.

But, one night, following lively, irreverent banter, daughter-in-law, Linda, offers to say grace.

“Lord, bless these sinners
while they eat their dinners. Amen.”

Sounds a little like the prayer of the Pharisee in our text today. “God, I thank you that I am not like those other people, those sinners.”

Rev. Mandy Sayers of Elliot City, Maryland, says she had to fight the urge to think something similar when she was asked to submit a sermon to a well-respected radio program and web-site, Day 1.org.

There are many famous, popular preachers who are invited each Sunday of the year to proclaim the Word of God on Day 1. She was honored to be included though she is very young and inexperienced.

Feeling her Cheerios she thought for a moment, “I thank you, Lord, that I’m better than at least one of the great multitude of preachers they’ve had in their decades of amazing ministry.”

But, after some self-reflection and sober thought, her prayer changed to, “Be merciful to me, a preacher.”

I confess that’s where I am most weeks. “Help me, Lord! Your Word is precious and I can do harm, or through my feeble attempts, your word can inspire, enlighten, correct and challenge. Help me.”

Sayers says, two men went up to the Temple to pray-one leading with his extensive resume. He’s a Pharisee, a church regular, a charter member, city council chair, faithful in marriage, raises well-heeled kids, honest, forthright, thrifty, brave, and even a tither. A church valedictorian in the making.

The other fellow, the tax collector, seems to have staggered in there at the last minute. He’s in the corner, in the back row. You can bet he forgot his homework at home and has to borrow a pencil. He has little to commend him by way of righteousness.

A tax collector is despised and rejected by most. Tax collectors and sinners seem to be paired in scripture like we pair peanut butter and jelly or nuts and bolts, mac and cheese.

Jesus asks which one does God love most? The saint or the sinner?

Let’s break it down a bit.

At first, the Pharisee’s prayer seems to be directed toward God in thanksgiving, but if you look closely, it’s really a form of bragging and ridicule. The man is trusting himself for righteousness, as if to say, “Don’t worry about me, God. I got this. Send me a job to do because nobody can do it better than I can.”

The Pharisee regards other people with contempt. He's thankful he's not like the other screw-ups and misfits. Convicts, addicts, dead beats, people who vote for the other party.

Meanwhile, the tax collector is exhausted by his self-inventory. These moments of confession leave him so spent and aggrieved that he is beating his chest. He can't even look up. The tax collector knows he is a sinner who found his way to the temple, and other than that, it's all about God.

If the Pharisee's prayer is "I got this," then the tax collector's is, "I got nothing. Nothing but you, God."

Sayers says she thinks that whenever we get to the place where we realize we cannot achieve or earn our way into God's heart, that's when God's eyes begin to sparkle. Because that's when we are ready to be purposed by God. We are ready to serve, to show and share the love of Jesus with Pharisees, tax collectors, and everyone in-between.

Jesus demonstrates humility over and over. He says take the last place at the banquet. If you want to be great, be a servant. Become like a child to enter the kingdom. Take up a towel and wash each other's feet.

Sayers says a few times in her ministry, she has had the privilege of going up to the temple to pray with some folks in recovery groups. Or rather down to the basement to pray. She finds it humbling and inspiring to hear the stories from those who are very clear that they need God's help, they can't do this on their own, that they need and want the help of their brothers and sisters here in their daily walk. Every single person is welcomed. There is coffee, hospitality, acceptance. There is love. People of all ages, pedigrees, conditions, in biker jackets and business suits and yoga pants.

Whenever she is there, Sayers feels like it's an oasis where those in attendance are able to be themselves, with no need to pretend they are anything other than the beloved children of God, freed from the endless torrent of judgment and shame, and competition, if even for a couple of hours. One evening, when the program

was over, a man named Tom got out his harmonica and Chuck played the out of tune piano.

“What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.”

She wonders if, when we all get to heaven, if it may look more like that church basement than a beautiful stained-glass sanctuary.

The surprise ending is this: a tax collector knows he needs God, that he is saved by God’s grace and not by his own achievement, or how well he kept the commandments. People who are saved by grace, whose hearts are broken and re-made make great Sunday School teachers, and choir members, and committee members and even preachers. They are wonderful at setting the table for Communion. They know what it is to be hungry and thirsty for the things of God.

Those who are forgiven great debt can be the most forgiving. They are the ones who sit with people in the hospital waiting room or at the bedside, not counting the time, just bearing witness to the pain and fear and unknown.

If they have a theme song, it’s probably more like “Standing On the Promises” than “I Did It My Way,” no offense to Frank Sinatra.

Two men went up to the temple to pray...and we can see ourselves in both of them, can’t we?

I’ve had some eye problems lately. Thankfully, they are being resolved. I’m going to have cataract surgery after the New Year. But, at the end of a doctor’s visit a few days ago, I was told I would have to return in a week for another exam...this time I was to go without eye makeup for a minimum of 48 hours before the appointment to avoid any stray particles of the products affecting my readings.

Seriously? Forty-eight hours without mascara? I am so self-conscious about my hair loss, and absentee eyelashes, that I used to get eyelash extensions and had them refreshed about once a month.

The Pharisee in me is afraid to be seen as I really am. And that's my spiritual work in the days ahead.

So, when we go up to the temple, or down the street, or kneeling beside our beds to pray, let us let go of all the vain things we carry, and bow before the one who calls us beloved, the one who made us in God's own image, called us God's people when we were no people, the one who, when we were in a far-off country, threw us a party and put the best robe around our shoulders, and said, "Come home."

*Affirmation of Faith A Declaration of Faith, PCUSA, 1985

We are certain that Jesus lives.

He lives as God with us,

touching all of human life with the presence of God.

He lives as one of us with God.

Because he shares our humanity,

He has bound us to himself in love.

We declare that Jesus is Lord.

**We have an advocate in
the innermost life of God.**

**His resurrection is a decisive victory
over the powers that deform and destroy human life.**

His lordship is hidden.

The world appears to be

dominated by people and systems that do not acknowledge his rule.

But his Lordship is real.

**It demands our loyalty and sets us free from all the lesser lords who threaten
us.**

**We maintain that ultimate sovereignty
now belongs to Jesus Christ.**

In every sphere of life,

Jesus is Lord.

He has been from the beginning.

**He will be Lord at the end.
Even now he is Lord.**

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns
Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Gifts of Tithe and Offering
Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

*Hymn 36 For the Fruit of all Creation

*Blessing

May the God of endurance and encouragement, grant you to live in such harmony with one another that with one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Go now in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

*Postlude