

Shame and forgiveness

Sunday, October 20, 2019

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When we are here in the Sanctuary in Worship, the layout of the Church seems so easy to see, that our worship in the Sanctuary overflows into Fellowship and from Fellowship into service in the world; There is one hallway to Offices and Room 5; A second hallway to rooms 1, 3 and 4; A 3rd to the Sweet Rm, the Choir Room and Spiritual Center; I have not found Rm 2? all accessible from the Narthex. But truth be told, there have repeatedly been times, when I wind up going down the wrong hallway and have gotten lost! Maybe it is something from my childhood, or the parables of the Lost Sheep, or Prodigal Son, But for a Pastor getting Lost in the Church has a sense of shame, that I should know better.

That is the difficulty with this parable. Anyone who has read even a portion of the Gospel of Luke, knows that Jesus stated he came for the Lost and not for those who were already righteous. Jesus's concern is for the Tax Collectors, the Poor, Versus the ones who regularly test and challenge him are the Pharisees. SO the easy mistake is to assume that the Meaning of this Parable is this Pharisee is wrong because he is a self-righteous, and the Tax Collector is right because he is humble, **so the MORAL is be humble! ...** Except that leaves us with the possibility of adapting the prayer of the Pharisee "I thank God I am not like the Pharisee, pious, self-righteous, a hypocrite, like other people!" which cannot be right because other than his prayer, the Pharisee was doing everything the Law required.

I wonder if there are not three other faith statements, implicit in this parable...

First, that before we worship, before we pray, How do we perceive ourselves? ? The Pharisee perceived himself as a self-made man. He has pulled himself up by his bootstraps. Nobody helped him to succeed. When he had done wrong, he fasted. Whenever he was in need, he meditated and prayed by himself, and he found the answers he needed. The Tax Collector is ashamed. He had done wrong, he bows his head and beats himself up for not following God.

The point of shame, is not to judge others or put someone down as the Pharisee did here; the point of shame, is for us to challenge ourselves to turn, to repent and choose to live differently. What is important is the forgiveness and relationship, the living of life, not the past, not the wrong, not the shame. Too often, we stop at the point of judgement, identifying others as shamed, instead of working to redeem, to forgive. We do not have to be perfect! As Reformed Protestant Christians, we have a unique emphasis. We do not have a Crucifix of the Suffering of Jesus! We look through a Resurrection Cross, through the Cross and Resurrection to life made new. How different this parable would have been, had the Pharisee recognized the Tax Collector beating his breast, and gone over to him, to ask how he could help? If the Pharisee had asked the Tax Collector: to join in fasting and prayer together?

Second, How do we Perceive God and the world The Pharisee understood himself as Righteous and approached Faith as LAW, as a static instruction book. Believing if "I follow the rules, I will receive my reward." The difficulty is that a Prosperity Gospel, does not work. Just because we wander 40 years we may never find a Promised Land.

The Enlightenment was introduced in the 1600s as a grand experiment. That we imagine the Universe, this Planet, Life itself, all following Laws of Nature, like Gravity, Motion, Entropy, the Periodic Table of Elements, and if we could Know those laws; to follow, to use, to manipulate the Laws, we could Control our Lives, we could Master the Universe. But Creation is not a dead thing, the desert all around us is teeming with life. In Genesis 1, the point was not that the Creator Ceased Creating, God is still creating today, on the 7th day God allowed Humanity to become Co-Creators with God. There are Laws of Nature, which 99 times out of 100 are absolute, but there is that 100th time, whether we call it fate, an accident, spurious, unpredicted, or we recognize "God's Humor" does not occur as we expected. This was why the Book of Leviticus was unsatisfactory and we needed a Savior. Learning the patterns of life from the Law is important, but life is fluid. God is not a dead, static thing, God is alive and independent. We live in relationship to God and to the world around us.

Ironically, while he is following all the historic, spiritual disciplines, the Pharisee seems to be living as if there is no God or as if God does not matter. The Pharisee was saying the words of prayers, but never expected to hear an answer. When we live as if there is no God, we make ourselves into our own God.

Third is Where we Perceive ourselves to be? DO we recognize we are Outsiders, or insiders? Do we just try to go in the general direction we believe we want to go, knowing we can turn around whenever we get lost? If I am in the Office and go straight ahead, it is different than if I am here in the Chancel, or in the Sweet Room. In the Ancient Temple, there were places considered sacred, and places that were profane. Non-Believers were not permitted inside the Temple. In the Pharisees' testing Jesus, whether it is right to Pay Taxes to Caesar or not, Jesus asks for a Roman Coin, because Money Changers were outside, and inside the Temple you profaned yourself to have something Roman on your person. Only those who were in Right-Relationship with God were permitted to come forward to pray. The purpose of The Narthex was not as a Vestibule for Sound Systems and a Cry-Room, the NARTHEX was where you Confessed your Sins, before entering the actual Sanctuary to atone in sacrifice and to pray. Only the most sacred, the Ordained, could enter the Chancel, the Holy of Holies to be near to God. In fact, the part I like best, is that the High Priest was required to wear a Bell and a long Rope as a Life-line, that if God erupted against the High Priest, he could ring the bell and others would pull him out. There are times in Sermons, I think Preachers should have a Lifeline for others to rescue them.

Our Preparation for Worship this day from the Book of Joel, as well as our focus on Jesus' Resurrection, emphasize that while there have been times of Shame, of loss and Being the LOST, there is also a time and space of Forgiveness. In a time of Forgiveness the past is swallowed up in being Reclaimed and Redeemed. Where instead of dwelling on the Past, or even on the Present, we are able to Dream dreams, to Imagine Visions. And not only the Pharisees, or the Learned, the Divine, the Ordained, BUT everyone, Servants and Slaves, everyone. These words become Peter's Witness on the Day of Pentecost, 50 Days after Easter, when the Holy Spirit is gifted.

I am looking forward to the weeks to come... In my first year in Ministry, I was trained in Stephen's Ministry and am excited to learn how this is embodied in this church. In two weeks to listen to Bob and Kristi Rice, because beginning in the summer of 2001 we sponsored 4 young men who were Refugees of South Sudan. They were called "Lost Boys" by Reporters who told the world of their story. As children, their Villages had been bombed, and without adult leadership or supervision millions of children had walked across the Sahara to Ethiopia where they lived in Refugee Camps, until these were destroyed and they walked back across the wilderness south to Kenya. As Refugees, they were compared to the

Lost Boys of Peter Pan, who lived in Never-never-land. Five years after they came to America, their 25 year long Civil War was coming to a close and I went Solo to represent them, reuniting them with their families. When I arrived at the Kenyan Airport, the person who was to meet me was nowhere in sight. I was clearly, the only Minister, the only American, and the only Caucasian in this busy airport. So I waited for close to an hour, feeling very lost. When suddenly the doors of the airport opened and 30 young men came in carrying a Banner that read "LOST BOY LINDSEY", and I realized in that culture I was the lost who had been found, redeemed, forgiven, and so are we all.