

Surprising Blessings

October 23, 2022, Psalm 65, and Luke 18: 9-14

This morning, as well as receiving new members into our church, we received another one of Jesus' parables. Today's parable continues the teachings about prayer that Jesus is bent on gifting to his disciples before he heads finally to Jerusalem where they will meet him again praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Before we turn toward this parable, can we look back to the prayers we prayed this morning? Our Call to Worship set us to praying like this. "God, we come from years of losses – pandemic years, disappointment years, hiding years – and from broken days, wasted hours, painful moments. Yet our hands are out, expecting love so wide it seeps through our fingers. We hold only what we share. We receive only what is shared with us – worship blessings, life blessings, surprising blessings."

Our Unison Prayer had us pray like this. "God thank you for another day. With each hour may we be watchful for your grace, ready to show your love, and eager to tell the good news of Jesus Christ. Make us more faithful than we were yesterday and lead us in the path of righteousness."

The Pharisee and the tax collector came up to the temple to pray. We come to church to see friends, welcome our new members, have a time of sweet fellowship, pray for the soul of Verne Bissell, and above all, to show our most vulnerable self to God. We come to be transformed from our self-focus to a God and neighbor focus.

Remember that Jesus was Jewish through and through. His prayer book was the Book of Psalms, so it is sweet that that today we also got to hear one of his prayers. The Pharisees were a particular group of God fearing Jews, striving to do and be what God might have them do and be. A lot like Jesus who humbled himself to do and be what God called him into the world to be and do. So be wary if you find yourself demonizing the Pharisee or Jews in general in this story or in any way.

And the tax collector? We know that Jesus often spoke of tax collectors as people who were despised by the local community because they worked for the Roman Empire, just as pretty much all of us, in one way or another, work for the system that we are embedded in. The tax collectors were some of the sinners that Jesus loved to hang with. Just as he is here with us today.

Both of the men came to the temple to in one way or another, thank God for another day. Their prayers sound quite different from each other – one praying "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 all my income.' And the other saying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

And yet, both of them, standing in their own corners, are doing the same thing. They are trying to get God's ear.

We listeners of this parable have our ideas about who is the most or the least righteous or humble person, but God is present to welcome us all. Maybe God is saying "Here I am. You have my ear. Show yourself." And they and we do.

That to me is what Jesus is saying to his imperfect followers. Here I am. It is good that you are here, in whatever condition you are in. As we pray in our opening welcome every Sunday “Whoever you are. Wherever you are in your life and in your spiritual journey. Whoever you love. However you are feeling today. However strong your faith and strong your doubts. Whoever you are. You are welcome here.”

It is way too easy to put the blame on others some days, and on other days, to put the blame on ourselves. Blame the Pharisee. Blame the tax collector. Blame the person on the other side of any aisle. Blame our parents. Blame our children. Blame our upbringing. Blame our church. Blame our teachers. Blame our pitiful selves.

It is easy, way too easy to play the blame game.

I do not think that this is what Jesus is doing in this parable. I think he is working hard to meet us in our imperfection, to wipe away our tears and our fears and our tendency to blame so we can meet each other in God’s enormous heart.

The parable ends with a surprising blessing. The two people praying at the opposite sides of the temple meet each other in Jesus’ last words in this parable. Jesus puts it this way. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Imagine them meeting on a ladder to heaven as in another Biblical story where Jacob, on his way to meet his estranged brother falls asleep on a hard stone pillow and has a vision of a ladder to heaven opening up before him with angels walking up and down. And he says, “surely the presence of the Lord must be in this place!”

The one who exalts himself to God will drop down a rung. The one who is already on the floor will come up a rung. There they meet. Face to face. And here we meet.

God and Jesus are not content to let us live and die in our own wretched condition. God and Jesus want us to meet up and to have God’s ear and eye. To be healed and loved beyond anything we can imagine on our own.

Because of the Grace of God, today, in this very moment we are made right with the Lord. Thank you everyone for coming to this house of hope. Thank you for bringing your whole self and for meeting here to be together in the presence of God.

God thank you for another day. With each hour may we be watchful for your grace, ready to show your love, and eager to tell the good news of Jesus Christ. Make us more faithful than we were yesterday and lead us in the path of righteousness. Amen.