

October 27, 2019

20C Pentecost

Rev Ken Wratten, St Luke's

Sirach 35:12-17

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 I have fought the good fight. I have kept the faith.

Luke 18:9-14 The Pharisee and the Publican

In today's Gospel reading from Luke the Pharisee in Jesus' parable said, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." This parable is not about the Pharisee showing off, or lacking in humility. He really believes that his good, virtuous deeds, following and even exceeding the letter of the law, is enough to please God. He believes that if everybody lived like he did, all would be right with the world. What God says through the teaching of Jesus Christ is that human goodness is not enough. Human goodness by itself cannot fix this broken world. What the world needs is to be immersed in God's grace. People's good deeds are not the power source that makes grace happen; God is the source that makes grace happen. The purpose of life is not about what we can do; it is about what we will allow God to do through us.

The Pharisee did not leave any room for God to accomplish growth or change through him. He had himself all figured out. He had life figured out. He had God figured out. Do good; obey the rules, and all shall be well. The tax collector knew that there was nothing he could do that would make him right with God; he was completely open to God's love. He had chosen a career that depended on cheating his own people out of their money. He knew that he could only place himself squarely on God's mercy; and that is exactly what he did.

Being Christian is not simply about being good; it is about being motivated through life by our desire to bring honor to God. When you and I make that life choice, we enter into a deeply spiritual place with God; in that holy place we give God control to guide us and bless us; and He has promised to do just that.

I have been reflecting on this passage, and the importance Jesus placed on having trust in God to be the sole source of grace; and not our own good works. The image that came to my mind was from my ordination to the diaconate.

I was one of three candidates to be ordained to the diaconate. We together decided to incorporate an ancient practice into the service. There is a place in the liturgy when the people and clergy pray over those about to be ordained. There is an option, almost never practiced, for the Postulants to lie

prostrate - face down on the floor, with hands extended to form the shape of a cross, while those prayers are being said. It is a very visual act of total submission to God's will. It was very meaningful to the three of us to do that. I will never forget it. I can honestly say that that symbol of submission has stayed with me and reminded me what ministry is about.

Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector to stress that our good works are not done to earn us God's love. We already have God's love. The responsibility we carry is to keep ourselves open and receptive to that love, and in fact to order our lives so that we are in sync with that power source. This means not feeling spiritually superior to anybody, as the Pharisee did, but to feel spiritually prostrate before God.

There is one more point to this short parable from Jesus. The Pharisee showed contempt for the tax collector. "I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." The Pharisee's high commitment to fasting and tithing made him feel anger against him. But the tax collector was in the Temple. Instead of having the normal attitude of prayer with head and hands raised, his head was lowered in shame, and he was beating his breast in remorse. He was standing 'far off', feeling separated. He wanted God's grace.

It is easy to be judging of the Pharisee. But have we felt contempt for the homeless person who is pan handling at the exit doors of the grocery store? Or for the person with an address in a low income part of town? Or at the other extreme, a person flaunting their wealth with a 5 bedroom home, 4 cars, 2 vacation homes, a few time shares, and nothing spent on helping people who have no home?

Jesus was not telling this story to the Pharisees; he was telling it to the people, to warn them about pride, self-sufficiency, and a relationship with God based on their own works. He was warning them to be careful about judging other people's spirituality, instead of focusing on being spiritually prostrate before God.

I encourage you to give focus this week on an attitude of bringing honor to God. Present yourself completely, humbly, before God.

Amen.