

“Back To The Basics”

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2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

[Jesus said,]

“...the tax collector, standing far off,

would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying,

‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”

Luke 18:13

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to get back to the basics of what it should mean to be a Christian.

Amen

If you were to go to a Halloween costume party this week

and the theme was “Come as you are from Biblical times”,

but the only costumes left at the store were

‘Pharisee’ or ‘Tax-collector’ – which one would you be?

Now, Pharisees usually have a bad reputation – especially from texts like

today’s Gospel parable where Jesus makes a point to contrast

the arrogance of the Pharisee with the humility of the Tax-collector.

Modern theologians argue that we need to realize how these two examples

would’ve been understood by the people back in Jesus’ time.

The Pharisees were among those in the community who bravely helped

their society to maintain their Jewish traditions while occupied

by the pagan Roman Empire.

So, Jesus challenged his listeners to acknowledge the problem

of self-righteousness and the abuse of power.

Regarding tax-collectors,

the common people would have seen them as collaborators with the enemy –

helping the Romans to impose economic oppression upon them.

In this instance, Jesus was getting people to recognize that even their enemies

could have a change of heart and deserve mercy, too.

<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/october-27-2013.html>

There’s an old saying that says,

‘When you point a finger at someone else, three fingers point back at you.’

At one time or another,

both costumes of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector are going to fit on us.

So what do we do?

We go back to the basics.

Willard, p.2

‘Whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey’
is part of our welcome here at the United Church of Christ at The Villages.
Whether someone has grown up in the Christian church,
or they have just started to attend church at any age,
we can all benefit by going back to the basics.

What that means individually certainly varies,
because we all have different needs and different paths.
Still as Christians, we are headed for the same destination:
the Kingdom of Heaven, and on the road to salvation,
we learn about God, discover who we are in the process,
and recognize there are others just like us, on their own path, too.

On the Christian path, we have resources available to us
and skills to be learned to help us along the Way.

Such basic resources include
the Bible, Church tradition, Christian fellowship, and personal experience.
Basic skills to be learned are Bible study, public and silent prayer, hymn singing,
breaking bread with others, and performing charitable service.

From the Bible as a resource,
we have the example of Jesus Christ in the Gospel narratives and his teachings,
but also the stories, prophecy, and wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures
that guided and inspired Jesus himself;
and there are letters of guidance from the Apostle Paul and others,
the story of how the early Church was formed,
and the revelation for a hopeful future.

Some take the words of the Bible literally;
Some see it only as myth that is not to be taken seriously;
Some look for why it’s written the way it is and ask,
“What does the Bible still have to say for our time?”

Bible study is a skill that can be learned to help you be familiar
with what’s in the Bible – to dig and see that you can find answers for you.
You can do this on your own, but it is best to test your ideas in a group of people
with various opinions to help bring out truths hidden like buried treasure.
In this way, you can grow in discernment of God’s Word.
Bible study is good preparation for developing other skills,
such as reading scripture publicly and even Biblical storytelling.

Willard, p.3

From the resource of Church tradition,
we have regular Sunday worship for the practice of prayers, hymnsong, and rituals
which were done originally in languages and cultural forms of long ago
by the apostles, bishops, priests, deacons, nuns, pilgrims, believers
who came before us and who were no less Pharisee and Tax-collector
than any of us.

The Eastern Orthodox Liturgy goes back at least to the 4th Century CE,
and like the Roman Catholic Mass, the Liturgy retells the story of Christ.
Protestant worship tells the story of the believer – allowing congregants to commit
and re-commit one's life to follow Christ each Sunday.

The prayer of the Tax-collector is a form of the 'Jesus Prayer' –
a building block of the Eastern Orthodox Liturgy
Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me.

It is the prayer of the ten lepers who cried out to Jesus;
it is the prayer of blind Bartimaeus;
but it is also a prayer with more ancient roots.

It is the first prayer: *help me.*

This is where the stories of the Bible and the story of our own lives intersect.
Setting such a prayer to memory – like the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm
is a skill to be learned.

As a skill, praying this prayer of 'help me' is the beginning of faith
when we claim for ourselves that there is one who will hear –
that there is a God.

Devotionals can help guide you to develop your skills in
personal prayer and silent meditation,
but praying aloud with others is also important
to help your prayers become a dialogue with God.

Hymn singing is a bridge between Biblical stories and prayer;
Singing is both a resource and a skill that goes back
even before the Psalms were chanted at the Temple of Jerusalem.

The Bible tells us that Jesus sang a hymn with his disciples
as they departed the Last Supper;
and that Paul and Silas sang while they were in prison
which intrigued their jailer to eventually seek baptism.

Sacred music – inspired by the scriptures, has helped teach the faith
through the centuries taking the form of symphonies, concertos, and arias
for orchestras and choruses, and soloists.

But sacred music has also taken the form of Gospel songs, folk songs,
Christian rock and rap songs.

Willard, p.4

Sacred music is not just songs we sing in church,
but could be a folksong you sing on the lonely roads of your life.
There is even the song that you make up – the song of your own life,
which is what Native Americans call a ‘death song’,
though it’s really about life.

Such a song is sung in defiance of the world’s senselessness and meaninglessness,
but anticipating resurrection and rebirth to eternal life
by getting back to the basics.

The resource of ritual can be found
in baptism, which is the way we bring in the next generation of Christians;
and Holy Communion is specifically a remembrance
of Christ’s sacrifice and the nurturing love of God for humankind.

The performance of Holy Communion is a skill entrusted
to those who are called and specially trained to administer them,
but any baptized Christian can baptize someone –
baptism is a skill to be learned.

Participants and witnesses alike learn through their shared experience
of these rituals which are not simply meant to be re-enactments,
but allow congregants to experience for themselves
what the first followers of Christ also did.

From the resource of experiencing Church fellowship,
Christians learn to work together, to struggle, to celebrate, to be born,
and even to die when the time comes, in the fellowship of one another.
Christian fellowship is where you can share your witness, express your faith,
and live out your devotion to God by serving others,
working for justice and peace.

Back to the basics by applying these resources, leads to living a life of love,
working for a purpose greater than one’s own life,
and helping to build up the beloved community of God’s Kingdom.

Practicing the habit of your faith by showing love to others, is also to serve God,
and this leads to self discovery in the process.

Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses
on a church door in Germany, criticizing the Mediaeval Roman Church.

This started a revolution called the Reformation.

Those who felt Luther didn’t go far enough to ‘get back to the basics’,
followed John Calvin to become the Reformed Church, the Presbyterians,
the Puritans, the Pilgrims, and other religious sects.

These “*protest-ants*” formed denominations that exist to this day –
including our own United Church of Christ.

Willard, p.5

Breaking away from Catholicism, Protestant churches have all sought to cut through church doctrine to get back to the basics of looking to the authority of the Bible, decision-making as a community, and encouraging authentic relationship with God through Christ

Some look at the rise of so many denominations out of the Reformation with all their divisions, as a disgrace to Church history.

But another way to look at the diversity of so many churches is as a flowering of human faith expression that enables each of us to find the 'style' of worship where we can honestly express our faith and be who we are before God.

Having many denominations allows people to be traditional or progressive, Catholic/Orthodox or Protestant, mainline or fundamentalist.

The challenge to all Christians is to welcome that diversity while recognizing our unity through a common spirit of love – the Holy Spirit.

Theologian and author, Phyllis Tickle, says the Reformation was part of a 500 year cycle in which spiritual and social reforms take place.

She calls such events, 'rummage sales' – kind of like a church 'yard sale', in which communities revolutionize themselves

to discard, replace, withdraw from, or reform social systems.

Phyllis Tickle also claims that the Emergent Church movement likewise seeks to transform the Christian church in our time.

Periodically, we must get back to the basics of studying the Bible, praying with others, meditating in silence, singing songs of praise, sharing in table fellowship, and participating in charitable service.

Some of us are already very active in doing this while others need to be invited and perhaps encouraged with love, forgiveness, thanksgiving – the 'basics'.

We can take some encouragement from the Apostle Paul, a Pharisee himself, who was humbled and strengthened and sustained as a follower of Christ.

Paul found the resources he needed to develop the skills for bringing the Good News of God's love through Christ into the Roman Empire.

To paraphrase Paul in 2 Timothy 4:18...

"The Lord will always keep [you] from being harmed by evil, and [Christ] will bring [you] safely into his heavenly kingdom. Praise [God] forever and ever! Amen."

So, do you know what resources are available to you and what skills you need to develop?

In what ways do you need to get back to the basics?

Amen

*Our lesson today from 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
is about the Apostle Paul's final teachings to his protégé Timothy.
He anticipates that he will be martyred,
but also bears witness to how he had fought the good fight—
often alone in the face of great opposition.
He remains convinced of the truth of his mission
and the promise of heavenly reward...*

[Paul said,]

6 Now the time has come for me to die.

My life is like a drink offering being poured out on the altar.

7 I have fought well.

I have finished the race, and I have been faithful.

8 So a crown will be given to me

for pleasing the Lord.

He judges fairly, and on the day of judgment

he will give a crown to me and to everyone else

who wants him to appear with power.

16 When I was first put on trial, no one helped me.

In fact, everyone deserted me. I hope it won't be held against them.

17 But the Lord stood beside me.

He gave me the strength to tell his full message,

so that all Gentiles would hear it.

And I was kept safe from hungry lions.

18 The Lord will always keep me from being harmed by evil,

and he will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.

Praise him forever and ever! Amen.

Luke 18:9-14

- [9] [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others:
- [10] "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.
- [11] The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.
- [12] I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.'
- [13] But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'
- [14] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts [themselves] will be humbled, but [those] who [humble themselves] will be exalted."