

“The First Prayer”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC@The Villages, FL
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Joel 2:23-32

Luke 18:9-14

[Jesus said,]

‘But the tax-collector, standing far off,
would not even look up to heaven,
but was beating his breast and saying,
“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Luke 18:13

Let us pray... O God,

May our prayers be true conversations with you as our heart friend,
our most trusted ally with whom we can be ourselves
and through whom we can see others as ourselves. Amen

Last week I spoke of the Jesus Prayer in terms of a tradition
of the persistent calling upon the name of God for mercy.

This week, the Gospel lesson actually includes the formula
of the Jesus Prayer – ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Lord, have mercy.

I also said that I believe this was ‘the first prayer’ –
Help me. God, help me.

After the service last week, Jenny Froyd came up to me
and said she agreed ‘Help’ was the first prayer,
but then told me about a second ‘first prayer’...
‘Help me, Help me, Help me’ and
‘Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.’

I totally agree!

One of the most important functions of parables is to create empathy,
to put yourself in someone else’s shoes – or sandals as it may be,
and see the world from their perspective.

OK, so who are you in Jesus’ story today?

Aren’t we supposed to identify with the tax collector
who is weighted down with regrets and
humbled by his life’s experience to seek God’s mercy?
And the truth be told, doesn’t that shoe fit?

Willard, p.2

I can tell you the hardest thing about being a pastor
is reconciling expectations that others have –
along with personal expectations of
what it should mean to be a proper pastor.

And that's an important tension to maintain –
balancing the real responsibility for appropriate behavior
while discerning worries that are unnecessary
or even irrational.

So, pastors right along with everybody else have to do a reality check
with God, by frequently and fervently asking for help.

But... doesn't it irk you when you see somebody make a big deal
about how wonderful they are –
and pastors can certainly be that way
like those who go on and on and on in their lofty prayers
like those smarmy preachers on TV
who are especially annoying that way
convinced they are right on everything
from religious doctrine to politics.

And it's not just the conservatives –
how about those progressive religious types
who go on and on about tearing down all the old traditions
like they got an ax to grind
and only too ready to turn the tables about who's right.
They're no different from the arrogant extremists they despise...

Whoops!

I guess I should identify with that smug Pharisee, too.
As it says at the very beginning of this Gospel lesson
how Jesus was speaking with a 'tough' audience:
'who trusted in themselves that they were righteous
and regarded others with contempt...'

Now the shoe's on the other foot
and I have to take a step back to acknowledge my arrogance.
It's an easy trap to fall into especially around election time
and all the political conversations we may be having
with family & friends about forwarded e-mails,
let alone all the TV personalities ranting and raving
and those attack ads every 10 minutes.

Willard, p.3

The rhetoric is angry, seeking to polarize and incite action –
but don't take the bait.

Because the other side won't go away
after an election, a war, or an argument.

No matter who wins,
you still have to come to terms with the opposition in your midst.

The poem , “The Cookie Thief” by Valerie Cox sums up the problem:

A woman was waiting at an airport one night
With several long hours before her flight
She hunted for a book in the airport shop
Bought a bag of cookies and found a place to drop
She was engrossed in her book but happened to see
That the man beside her as bold as could be
Grabbed a cookie or two from the bag between
Which she tried to ignore to avoid a scene
She munched cookies and watched the clock
As this gutsy cookie thief diminished her stock
She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by
Thinking "If I wasn't so nice I'd blacken his eye"
With each cookie she took he took one too
And when only one was left she wondered what he'd do
With a smile on his face and a nervous laugh
He took the last cookie and broke it in half
He offered her half as he ate the other
She snatched it from him and thought "Oh brother
This guy has some nerve and he's also rude
Why he didn't even show any gratitude"
She had never known when she had been so galled
And sighed with relief when her flight was called
She gathered her belongings and headed for the gate
Refusing to look back at the thieving ingrate
She boarded the plane and sank in her seat
Then sought her book which was almost complete
As she reached in her baggage she gasped with surprise
There was her bag of cookies in front of her eyes
"If mine are here" she moaned with despair
"Then the others were his and he tried to share"
Too late to apologize she realized with grief
That she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief

<http://www.motivatingquotes.com/cookie.htm>

Willard, p.4

Jesus has given us two extremes –

the example of a person who did all the right things,
but was arrogant at heart
and someone who acted unjustly,
but opened their heart honestly before God.

And it is in this openness to God that we are able to receive
forgiveness and options for what to do the next time.

The lesson from the Book of Joel speaks of a time of judgment
when the land of Israel was laid waste by swarms of locusts.
But God's promised blessing was demonstrated with the return
of rain to heal the wasteland.

And God promised to do the same thing with people by pouring out
God's Spirit as it is said in Joel 2:28,

'Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men [and women] shall dream dreams,
and your young men [and women] shall see visions.'

When we call out to God and pour out our hearts honestly for help
we are in a position for God to call us back
and have our hearts filled with hope and new vision.

It is 29 years ago to the day when I stood on a cliff overlooking
a beautiful lake and ranges of mountains outside of Tokyo, Japan
where I recommitted my life to Christ,
and reconfirmed God's saving action in my life.

It is an event that has taken on even greater significance for me
with the perspective of the years about what could've been.

But I am standing here today with you as the installed pastor
for the United Church of Christ at The Villages
because of what happened back then.

As it says in Joel 2:32,

'Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved;
for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said,
and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.'

Amen

Joel 2:23-32

23 O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.

24 The threshing-floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

25 I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

26 You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

27 You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

28 Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

29 Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

30 I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.

31 The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,
before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

32 Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved;
for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said,
and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Luke 18:9-14

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10“Two men went up to the temple to pray,
one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.

11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus,
“God, I thank you that I am not like other people:
thieves, rogues, adulterers,
or even like this tax-collector.

12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

13But the tax-collector, standing far off,
would not even look up to heaven,
but was beating his breast and saying,
“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

14I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other;
for all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

October 24, 2010

Dear Friends,

It was 29 years ago that I was in Japan and led to a cliff overlooking a lake below and mountains ranging out and away to the north, covered in trees in their autumn brilliance as the sun set - and John Meyer led me in a prayer of confession, profession, and acceptance of Jesus Christ as my savior. That event has taken on an even greater significance for me given the perspective of the years since.

And it was during my stay with John & Betty Meyer that I was introduced to such remarkable things as miso soup, ofuro, spiced tea, and Daily Light for the Daily Path (tomorrow's reference is included below). Thank you always.

Love & Peace in Christ,

Drew

Daily Light on the Daily Path

[<http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/devotions/daily.light/?date=2010-10-24>]

October 24

Morning

“I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.”

Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.” “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”—I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD.”—Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!—Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”?—“In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the LORD, your Redeemer.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.—We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Jonah 2:4; Isa. 49:14, 15; Lam. 3:17, 18; Ps. 44:23; Isa. 40:27; Isa. 54:8; Ps. 43:5; 2 Cor. 4:8, 9 ([Read full verses...](#))

Evening

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them.

There are many who say, “Who will show us some good?”—What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. . . . All is vanity and a striving after wind.—“They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”—“I will pour water on the thirsty land.”—“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”—O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Isa. 41:17; Ps. 4:6; Eccl. 2:22, 23, 17; Jer. 2:13; John 6:37; Isa. 44:3; Matt. 5:6; Ps. 63:1 ([Read full verses...](#))