

“Thanks-Giving and Thanks-Receiving”

Luke 18:9-17

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

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

11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

15 People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them.

16 But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

17 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Introduction

Have you heard the story of a mother, son, and tornado? One day a tornado roared through their town. The mother clung to a tree and tried to hold her son, but the swirling winds carried him into the sky. The woman began to weep and pray: “Please, O Lord, bring back my boy! He’s all I have. I’d do anything not to lose him. If you’ll bring him back, I’ll serve you all my days.”

Suddenly the boy toppled from the sky, right at her feet. He was a bit scraped up but safe and sound. His mother joyfully attended to him. Then she stopped for a moment, looked to the sky, and said, “He had a hat, Lord.”

I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving. Not just with the symbolic and really filling Thanksgiving dinner, but the expressions of thanks to God for all he is and all he has done (including the hat!).

In 1789, George Washington wrote the first Thanksgiving Proclamation: “Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor... I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.”

And we read from Psalm 100: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; Give thanks to him and praise his name.” Thanks and praise. In Luke 18, we read how Jesus told this parable,

how two people expressed thanks and praise to God in diametrically opposed ways. Let's have a closer look.

I. Pride and Humility

Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee." Those who were "confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else," would be thinking, "Oh yes. An upstanding member of our community." A wise, spiritual, admired, lay leader. "Yay for the Pharisee!"

"And the other was a tax collector." "Boo to the tax collector." A despised loser is he. "He's disgusting. The way he steals from us on behalf of the Roman occupiers."

"The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.'" No kidding, he's glad he's not like those other people. "He could never be like them, thank God."

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" No kidding, he stood at a distance. God might strike him down right there and then. "He has a nerve coming here to pray."

Jesus' story is going along quite well for the listeners and then says, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God." Excuse me, Jesus!?! What are you talking about? How would a tax collector ever, ever be justified before a Pharisee??? That's just not fair

Jesus told them, "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." I imagine the comments and thoughts of those "confident of their own righteousness who looked down on everyone else," became silent.

Jesus' parable is about two kinds of prayer and two attitudes of the heart. Pride and humility. The first seemed to be giving praise to God but really was self-congratulation. Five times in two verses, he uses the first-person pronoun – I, I, I, I and I. God should be honored to have this wonderful, faithful one.

The second prayer was one of confession, contrition. No self-congratulation, no boast of good deeds. Only his need for God's mercy. The Pharisee had everything except one essential thing. The tax collector had nothing except his own unworthiness and need for God's grace.

The season of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, begins next Sunday. Mary's response to her pregnancy shows the heart of the second prayer in Luke chapter one. "My soul magnifies the Lord... for he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts... he has lifted up the humble." The Parable of the Good Samaritan is found in Luke 10 when Jesus asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." In Luke 11, Jesus rails against the religious leaders. "Woe to you Pharisees. You give God a tenth... but you neglect justice and the love of God...

because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it... And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.” Then in Luke 14, Jesus warns them, “But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Are you getting the point?

II. Like Children

Luke couples this parable with “Let the little children come to me.” He tells us how “People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them.”

You see, it was the custom for mothers to bring their children to some distinguished Rabbi on their first birthday for a blessing. The disciples may have thought that Jesus had more important matters to attend to. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” It’s a wonder and grace in Jesus Christ: he had time for children even in the midst of his teaching and healing ministry.

Faith and humility go together. For the disciples and for us adults, faith and humility have to be relearned. Little children haven’t yet lost the sense of wonder. A child trusts the parents the way Jesus would have us trust him. Children know how to receive love and affection. Teach children about Jesus and they respond so easily. And then, the world trains it out of them. The Pharisee had lost it. The tax collector had relearned it.

Romano Guardini was an Italian-born German Catholic priest, author, and academic. He was one of the most important figures in Catholic intellectual life in the 20th century. He was a professor at the University of Berlin until the Nazis expelled him in 1939. Guardini was a professor for eventual Pope Benedict. Pope Francis began a doctoral thesis on his thought. Flannery O’Connor often recommended his writings to friends. Yet, this stellar mind wrote that worship is rather like play. He said, “It is in the highest sense the life of a child... The soul learns to waste time for the sake of God.” Don’t you love that? Wasting time for the sake of God in your life!

When Bruce Larson was pastor for University Pres in Seattle, he said, “We can come to worship to do something, to learn something, to take some notes. Or, we can come as a child to celebrate the Lord who loves us and wants to make us partner with him in redeeming the world.”

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Conclusion

In our last newsletter, Pastor Chris wrote about the Deacons Fund helping people in need. “Being able to receive help is just as important to our spiritual development as giving help is.” Most of us are ready and willing to help. Yet, most of us are reluctant to ask for or receive help.

I have a few shirts and pants in my closet that had buttons come off. When I have tried to sew them back, I make a mess – strings all over the place, blood on my fingertips. Do you think I’d ask someone to help? No – perfectly good shirts and pants remain unworn for months!

Pastor Chris asks, “Why are we so reluctant to receive help? Are we afraid of appearing weak? God helps us. Yes, we are in need. But if we can’t receive help in relationships with others, how are we going to know how to receive help from God? So, she challenges all us self-sufficient Presbyterians. If someone offers “Can I help you with that?” whether it’s cleaning up something or a ride somewhere or the offer of a meal or help from the deacon fund...I challenge you to respond “yes, thank you.”

Talking about this at staff meeting last week, Nathan Parrish told us that his father often told him, “Don’t steal their blessing.” That’s because the kingdom of God is both thanks-giving and thanks-receiving. Let us pray together for this.

Psalm 100

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.

Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his;

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise;

Give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

His faithfulness continues through all generations.