

King of Glory Lutheran Church

October 22/23, 2022

Year C: 23rd Weekend after Pentecost: Luke 18:9-14

Rev. Debra Abbott

Psalm 84

¹How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

²My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

³Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

⁴Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

Luke 18:9-14

⁹He 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.”

In her book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes, “Here are the two best prayers I know: “Help me, help me, help me,” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” I read this book 20 years ago and have thought many times since that Anne Lamott knew what she was talking about.

There are days where we offer prayers to God that are carefully thought through or created using beautiful language. But today I want us to think about the prayers we offer to God that come from desperation and the prayers we offer to God that come from joy.

In our gospel reading today Jesus tells a story of two men. One of those men went to the temple, almost afraid to enter. He was a tax-collector and was weighed down by his own brokenness. He was desperate for forgiveness. Help me, help me, help me, we can imagine him crying out.

I wonder today if you have ever prayed the prayer “help me, help me, help me.” Asking God or another person for help means that you know that you need help, that you cannot find your way or fix what has been broken. It is a prayer of desperation and humility.

Many years ago I was at a conference for church leaders at Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp in Montana. This conference had wonderful worship services and fantastic speakers and great discussions with colleagues.

We were also invited into experiences where we were given challenges. One of those experiences made a lasting impact on me. Everyone in our group was led out into the woods and blindfolded and then told to go on a path holding onto a thin piece of rope that would guide us to the end of the path. Our instructor told us that at any time along the way if we couldn’t find the end of the path we should raise our hand and ask for help.

Not me I thought, I wouldn’t need to ask for help. I was absolutely determined to get through this challenge on my own. I held onto the rope and I walked and walked and walked but I never got to the end. And over time I couldn’t hear any of my colleagues walking around. I couldn’t figure out what I was doing wrong.

Finally, after quite a long time, a voice whispered in my ear, “if you need help, raise your hand.” And I did. Then the blindfold came off and I saw that I had been walking in circles. Everyone else in my group had raised their hand at some point.

In my determination to get through on my own I had been walking in circles, stubbornly refusing any help. I thought I could make it all on my own. I was too proud to ask for help. And that was exactly the point.

That exercise wandering around in the woods blindfolded happened 15 years ago and yet I think of that voice whispering in my ear regularly. "If you need help, raise your hand."

Anne Lamott said, "Here are the two best prayers I know: "Help me, help me, help me," and "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Now I think I was born just the slightest bit stubborn. It's my nature. But I also know that I was taught to do things for myself, take care of myself and be self-reliant. Somewhere along the way in my life I came to believe that asking for help was a sign of weakness. That people would think less of me or think me incapable if I couldn't do something or everything all on my own.

It's a part of the human condition isn't it? Striving to take care of ourselves. Wanting other people to respect and admire us. We spend time and energy trying to prove ourselves worthy and judge others in turn for what they can or cannot do. We define weak and strong by ability, works and invincibility.

Jesus, who is always turning everything we think we know upside down, teaches us today something about humility and vulnerability, inviting us to remember that we will always need God's help.

In our gospel reading today Jesus tells a parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Ouch.

So what does Jesus have to say to those who look down on others while at the same time congratulate themselves on their own accomplishments?

There were two men, one a Pharisee and one a tax-collector. The Pharisee was devoted to following the religious law, the Torah. The tax-collector worked for the Roman government and wouldn't have been very popular for that reason alone, but it's possible he was also dishonest and took money from people and kept it for himself.

Both men go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee is proud of who he is. He's generous and faithful by his own actions and he knows it.

But the tax collector asks God for mercy. This man knows he has hurt others and himself and is in need of forgiveness. It was all he could do to enter the temple.

Jesus concludes, “I 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.”

The tax collector is the surprising hero of this story. Remember who Jesus told this parable for, “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

The Pharisee who did everything right and looked down on those who didn’t is not the one Jesus says we should be like.

The Pharisee was good at drawing lines and creating neat categories, defining people who were good and people who were bad, the righteous and the sinners, the worthy and the unworthy, the right and the wrong.

But the tax collector made no attempt to draw any lines or put people in categories. He only knows his great need and dependence on God’s mercy. He doesn’t judge himself next to people who are better or worse than himself. In his desperation he cries out to God for help.

As Christians we strive to follow Jesus and live out God’s command to love God and our neighbor. And we do so knowing that we are imperfect, that we are broken, that we are sinners. We need God’s forgiveness and mercy.

We live as people called to good works and to be humble, knowing our own sin and brokenness. It is God who shows us the way, calling us to step back from the mirror, admiring our best qualities and achievements. Calling us to look to God for mercy, forgiveness and love. And then we are called to live in the same way. Showing mercy to others as God shows mercy on us.

Friends in Christ, Jesus teaches us today that it is not by our own goodness or strength or merit that we know God’s love. It is by God’s grace alone that we are loved and forgiven, just as we are. May you know God’s mercy and love in your life today as we continue to pray, help me, help me, help me and thank you, thank you, thank you.

Amen.