

Christ Church Sermons

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, October 28, 2007

The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Luke 18-9-14

“ Have Mercy On Me, A Sinner”

Last Wednesday night, following the thunder and lightning that at last brought the blessed rain, I returned home about 8pm to find that I had no electricity. I won't bore you with the details of how Progress Energy did its part – but still no electricity. Then, my wonderful neighbor and Christ Church parishioner, Bob Metz came and changed all the fuses – and I got partial electricity. And then our own Mr. Builder, Bob Chapman, came and solved the mystery and I got power everywhere. It's great to have a talented congregation.

But, the point is that it's a big shock to realize that the world we count on isn't necessarily the real world. And the self-sufficiency we think we have doesn't exist at all. Fire, flood, hurricanes and natural disasters of every kind remind us from time to time that we are really dependent creatures – not at all the powerful “masters of the universe” we think we are.

It's good to have these experiences. I often think that anyone who wants to understand the Bible should spend at least a year as a farmer. This year would have been a good one. Farmers had to plow under their drought stricken crops. The soil became as dry as dust. Experiences like this teach us a lot about human vulnerability and what it feels like when we suddenly find out that we are not sufficient of ourselves. But, that a good point to come to, says Jesus, because that's the point where prayer begins.

Prayer comes when we recognize our own inadequacy. Prayer wells up when something breaks through the iron-clad protection we wear over our own vulnerability. At first it's not necessarily good prayer – it's usually just a terrified cry for help. But, what I'm saying is that there is no prayer at all until the granite sub-strata of our self-created world breaks open and God's Reality comes through.

Prayer is a gift; it's not something we create. It doesn't require well constructed Elizabethan sentences. It's simply the expression of our need of God. Prayer is the cry of the soul towards One who is beyond our limited perception and power and yet is mysteriously present in our smallest need. Prayer is a response from the depths of our heart toward One who constantly calls to us and invites us into a relationship of love.

All of this is background to today's Gospel. “Two men went up to the Temple to pray,” says Jesus. And one of them prayed, and the other one talked to himself. The one who prayed was not a good man by any standard. He was an extortioner. He was unjust. As a Roman tax collector, in the eyes of every good Jew, he was a betrayer of his people – someone who was just worse than trash. Why such a man came to the Temple, we don't know. Maybe his child was sick; maybe his wife threatened to leave him; maybe his evil deeds had caught up with him. We don't know. But he came, and he stood at the back of the congregation where he hoped no one would see him. He kept his eyes on the floor because he was unable to look up at the majesty of God. He beat his breast. His body

rocked back and forth in anguish. And, from the deepest place within him, a place that he had always kept closed and locked, the accursed tax-collector felt the Grace of God reaching out to him. He felt God's presence surrounding him. He felt his own world of sin and betrayal splitting apart – and from the depths of his soul, the tax collector let out a cry of absolute vulnerability and need: “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

It was the cry of his heart. It was the truth of who he was. God be merciful to me, because I have nothing but my sins to bring to you. God be merciful, because I have hidden from you in a prison of my own making – and I know that, even now, I am afraid to walk out of it into your light. Be merciful to me and heal what I cannot heal and save what I cannot save, because I have no power to mend my own life.

We don't know what happened to the tax-collector. Jesus only says, “He went down to his house justified,” That's such an odd theological phrase. It means he was accepted, he was welcomed home. The despicable tax collector, who had broken all relationships in life, now knew that he still had the one relationship that truly counted. He was held fast in the bonds of infinite love. The great paradox for the tax collector was, that in knowing himself to be a sinner, he also knew himself to be claimed by God forever. His life was not his own. It was a gift that he received every day through the grace of God. He could be opened to that grace-filled life – that has his to choose. He could dance with it. He could breath it in with the same unconscious delight with which he breathed in the air around him. But, it would always be a gift. He could never create it for himself.

No one knows whether the tax collector began to respond more and more to the adventure of life that was given him in the grace of God. No one knows whether he became a moral and upright person. Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. What we do know is that the prayer of the tax collector has been on the lips of faithful people from the time of the New Testament.

I don't mean to suggest that Christians never pray the prayer of the Pharisee. In fact, we pray his prayer most of the time. “Thank you for my many blessings. Thank you for my wife and children. Thank you for the guidance I received as a child. Thank you for the opportunities I've had to play my part – and even in some small ways to distinguish myself.. These are the kinds of prayers we make all the time. And they're fine – as long as they remain prayers of thanksgiving to God. But, says Jesus, they stops being prayer when they move on into self-congratulation. “Thanks, God. Got the job. Well, I sort of knew I would. That guy, Wilson, is such a jerk. He couldn't organize his way out of a paper bag. The whole place would be in shambles if they'd hired him.” That kind of prayer – satisfying as it may be at the time - is just a way of keeping accounts in the world of our delusion. It's comparing ourselves with others rather than comparing ourselves to the goodness of God. What Jesus says about the Pharisee, that “He prayed thus with himself,” as the older translation has it, is exactly right. When prayer is no longer a response to the purposes of God, then it's not much more than talking to ourselves.

I am reminded that today, for many Protestant churches, is Reformation Sunday. It's the celebration of the Revolution within the Christian Church that brought us back to a sense of dependence on Faith alone. The great insight of the Reformation is that we are justified – that we are brought into a living relationship with God – solely by God's Grace. We are brought home to the heart of God – not because of anything we do, not because of anything we believe, and certainly not because of anything we accomplish – but solely because God seeks us out in Jesus Christ. Our part in this relationship is simply to trust God. That's what Faith means – to trust the faithfulness of God. We don't have

to beat our breast or bemoan our weaknesses. We don't have to carry on about being sinners. In fact, I rather think Jesus would have had a quiet word with the tax collector and told him to lighten up! Because, in God's world, there is nothing so broken that it cannot be fixed. The wonderful thing for us all – the good, the bad, and the ugly – is that the moment we discover our life is dependent upon the mercy and grace of God – in the moment we find ourselves part of the common herd of sinful humanity – in that very same moment we will also find out that God's Grace has been at work within us all along, exalting us to a Glory we could never have imagined for ourselves.

So, just for this week, how about making the tax collector's prayer your own - "God have mercy on me, a sinner!" Say it every day. Say it as often as you think of it. And see whether, at the end of the week, you are not feeling a little less stress from your self-imposed perfectionism. See whether you are not feeling some greater compassion for the burdens of others. And, see whether the eyes of your heart are not opened to a greater awareness of the Glory that waits to reveal itself to those who walk in faith and know that the Grace of God is sufficient for all our needs.