

Oct. 23/22 PENTECOST 23C ST. ANDREW'S

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Joel 2:23-32; Ps. 65; 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

We have been reading through the gospel of Luke this fall and today we have just heard another parable. Luke tells us that this one is for those who trusted in themselves and regarded others with contempt. It is about two people who went to the temple to pray – the Pharisee gave thanks that he was not like others and proceeded to tell God what a good man he is. The other man prayed a version of what has come to be known as the Jesus prayer in the Orthodox tradition: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” And Jesus commended this man saying, “... all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

So what does it mean to humble oneself? That is a question that has been explored for many centuries as Christians seek to live into the way of Jesus. In the Fifth Century, St. Benedict wrote a Rule for monks which transformed monastic life for a more than a thousand years. It continues to influence monasteries and individual Christians into our own day. As an aside, it is interesting to note that much of our Anglican patterns of worship are rooted in the traditions of prayer established by St. Benedict. The seventh chapter of his Rule is entitled “Concerning Humility” and in that chapter, he describes the path to humility using the symbol of Jacob’s ladder – as a ladder rising to God with 11 rungs on the path of humility. It is a real challenge to those who lead the monastic life, and pretty overwhelming for those who live in the world of daily life. It reminds me of the reader who accidentally proclaimed, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exhausted!”

So let’s take another look at these two people in the parable. The Pharisee is full of pride in all his accomplishments. He worships in the temple, he tithes, he fasts twice a week and no doubt is an upstanding and admired citizen. He has fulfilled the requirements of his faith and has accomplished much and has acquired much. On the other hand, the tax collector who has a good government job recognizes that his work has compromised his life. As a tax collector he acts on behalf of the Roman occupiers gathering the taxes from his own people. He likely does well financially, but there is a cost. And the cost is that he recognizes how far he falls short of the covenant with God. There is an inner restlessness that he recognizes as a spiritual need. And so he lowers his eyes, and probably his voice and asks for mercy. This person is the one that Jesus lifts up for us to look to as a sign of the kingdom. “...those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The parable is clearly a parable against raising oneself up and looking down on others who are different. It is also a parable advocating the great value of humility in the Christian life. And despite St. Benedict’s 11 rung ladder of humility, that is not a virtue that we can earn or develop by ourselves. So much of modern spirituality has become a kind of self-help project and the danger in that is that it can become one more thing that we take on and add to our list of personal accomplishments. Despite St. Paul’s analogy of faith as an athletic race in our second reading, we cannot approach the spiritual life as we might a physical challenge. As Brother Nicholas of the Society of St. John the Evangelist wrote this week, “Perhaps, if we find ourselves aspiring with some sense of urgency toward the transcendent or heavenly, the wisest thing is

simply to wait.” (“Brother Give us a Word”, Oct. 20). The value of true humility is that it creates a space for God’s grace to find a place in our hearts.

Just down the road from where we live is a corner house we pass every time we drive into town. An interesting couple live there and we often see them walking to places like Value Village or Goodwill. We’ve come to notice that over the weeks their house begins to accumulate a huge variety of treasures – furniture, appliances, clothing, and collectables. Eventually, these things spill out onto their balcony, their front porch and onto the lawn. In time, they seem to run out of room, so once in a while there seems to be a major cleaning and sorting and the items disappear only for the process to begin again. Soon their balcony begins to fill up again, and the overflow spills out onto the lawn. The problem is where to put all the stuff and so it is dispensed with and almost immediately replaced with something new. There seems to be an endless cycle of accumulation that leaves very little room for much of real value. The patterns of accumulation are obvious on that corner, and we might not so easily recognize similar patterns in our own lives – patterns of material accumulation, or of filling our hours with media of various kinds, or planning the next big trip, or developing our own patterns of activity or busy-ness that leaves little room for self-reflection, or ...well you can add to the list. When we find ourselves in such patterns we might discover that “when the divine knock comes on our door, there is no room at the inn.” When that happens we need once again to clear some space and create a room for the Spirit. Perhaps the place to begin or to recover that space is with silence. As the quotation from Mother Theresa in today’s bulletin reads, “God is the friend of silence... The more we receive in our silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life.”

The Tax Collector has recognized his own need for God and prays for mercy unlike the Pharisee whose inner house is so full there is no room to receive what God so generously offers.

The prophet Joel, whose ancient prophecies arose in a time of famine, and who promised a time when God would restore the abundance of the land, has for centuries also been understood as proclaiming the promise of God to pour out the Spirit upon a people who live in the midst of a spiritual famine – for those who experience a longing for God despite all that the world has to offer. And so we hear the prophetic promise in our own time, “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.”

We live in a time of great anxiety. Teachers can tell us that the number of children with some kind of anxiety diagnosis is rising. So much of our activity only adds to the problem. We can surely use the dreams and visions of young and old alike as we seek to respond to the call of the Kingdom.

In this season of Pentecost, we can rejoice that the Spirit of God has been given to those who make room for her. We give thanks that in Christ, the Kingdom of God has come near and as Anne reminded us last week, we lift up our hearts to receive what God offers us in all times and in all places. Through the resurrection of Jesus, the Spirit has been poured out upon young and old, men and women, and is given to all with eyes to see and who create a space in their hearts to receive God’s love and grace. “... all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

AMEN.