

“Wisdom, Knowledge, and Grace”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Joel 2:23-32

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus shared today’s parable with “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” If words could have eye-rolls in them, we would see them here. Can’t you imagine the narrator’s voice, or even in Jesus’ voice, the sarcasm towards these characters? They *thought* they knew, but they did not *know*. Already, in the first sentence, we are pointing fingers and collecting images of people we know who *are just like that*.

Two people walked into the Temple in Jesus’ parable. One was a Pharisee. He was a keeper of the law. Because of his religiosity, one would expect him to be good. He certainly thought that of himself. The other, the tax collector, was a known sinner. But the truth is, we don’t like either of them. We don’t like the Pharisee because he is holier-than-thou. He is so obsessed with purity that he does not know how to live or to love. The other man is a tax collector. We do not like him either. We can assume based on what was said of tax collectors that he used his role not only to make Rome rich; he has also lined his own pockets with whatever extras he was pleased to take from the people at his mercy. Like people who exploit the poor today for their own financial gain, this man was a *sinner*. And yet, though two people prayed in the temple, only one humbled himself. Indeed, the tax collector could not even look toward heaven as he beat his breast and begged God for mercy. The gospel does not say what that tax collector ended up doing with his life once he left the temple. It does not say whether he repaid each person he had cheated, or if he left his job as a tax collector. But the gospel did say that he was justified before God.

Two people walked into the Temple. Before we point fingers at who we know who is like one of these two characters, we must ask ourselves, Could one of them be me? Japanese American church leader Rev. Laura Mariko Cheifetz suggests that sometimes *we are* the people that others pray for deliverance from. It blows my mind that there could be some things that I am doing, or that you are doing, with the best of intentions that are actually hurting God, hurting the earth, or hurting other people. We think we are acting with God’s blessing. But generations from now we may be judged for our narrow-mindedness or sin. Perhaps this is even going on right now. And so, we need

to approach God and one another humbly, especially when we are feeling certain of our righteousness in relation to another's wrongness.

The Holy Spirit has moved in the church over the millennia in ways that have helped us see that even the church has not always been a place that acts as the people Jesus has called us to be. Joel tells us that when God pours the Spirit out on us, men and women will prophecy; the old shall dream dreams, and the young shall see visions, and the slave will be filled with the Spirit. This movement of the Spirit has allowed us to clear our eyes when we have acted wrongly before God. There is a phrase in the Reformed tradition called "Semper Reformanda" which means once reformed, always reforming. Although the Protestant Reformation happened 500 years ago, we are not done yet seeing how the Holy Spirit is changing and shaping the church and calling us to be right before God.

That is what the tax collector sought: a sense of justification before God.

*Justification* is a fancy theological word. It means that we are *made right with God*, and in the Reformed tradition, this justification comes not by our own efforts to impress God and do good in the world, but by God's free grace in coming to us. It is a gift that cannot be earned, as much as when a baby is baptized, it is a gift that infant has done nothing to earn or deserve. Martin Luther, who began his religious vocation as a Catholic monk, spent quite a lot of time praying in his cell and punishing himself over every single sin he could think of, and then when he could not think of any more sins, he would pray that God forgive his arrogance in thinking he had no more sin when surely he did but just wasn't realizing it. He lived in daily terror that he might face eternal damnation, but even worse than that he lived with the fear that God didn't love him. When the gospels revealed to him the idea of being justified by grace-- God's free gift-- and not by earning God's mercy and love through prayer and action, he felt such joy and freedom that he could not contain it. It evoked a passion in him that gave rise to the Protestant Reformation.

Now, I doubt any of us spend entire days on our knees because we are just wrecked over how much we have sinned before God. But don't be fooled. We all look for justification, in ourselves and others.

What signs might we seek to prove that we have value and worth, that we belong, and that we are beloved? Some of us cling to institutional power in the church. But it happens outside the church too. Maybe we are workaholics. It might be through having a body that fits in certain sized clothes, or the skincare products that fill our

bathroom cabinets that promise to erase our wrinkles, or make our skin lighter, or erase our blemishes. It might be by trying to get rid of a thick accent. We do what we can to secure ourselves on the highest rung of the ladder we can reach-- even if that means placing others on rungs below us. These efforts are all understandable: the pressures in the world are enormous, and even harder on some populations than on others. We are always looking for signs, for proof, of the knowledge and wisdom that we belong, that we have value, and that we are beloved. And sometimes, we push that burden onto others too.

Last month, a teenaged referee in my daughter's soccer league became uncomfortable because a coach-- he was from a different team-- approached her while she was refereeing the game and started asking her, "Where are you from?" You look Eastern European; are you from Russia?" She told him, while trying to keep up with the younger soccer players, that she was born here. "But you don't look like you're from here. Where are your parents from?" She then told him her parents came here from India. He then continued to talk to her about his favorite Indian foods while she tried to referee the game.

Turns out, she complained to the soccer league about this interaction and the league organizers ended up banning him from the rest of the games. Some parents think that was too harsh, and they certainly were sad that their team was no longer winning without their coach. But I think that what was missed was that in the coach's line of questioning towards this teenaged referee was the underlying assumption, "You don't look like you belong here." Even though their interaction should have been focused on the game, he tried to make it about curry, and she found herself feeling like she had to justify her belonging in that place, on that team, in this community, and in this country.

The beauty of God's grace is that with the knowledge and wisdom of that grace comes a sense of belonging. With it comes belovedness. With it comes an awareness of our value in God's eyes. And instead of acting with a sense of entitlement as a result of that grace, we are called to be better-- not out of fear of damnation, but because that is how we respond when we are loved. When we are certain of God's grace and love for us, we no longer have to point our fingers at others to assure ourselves of how much better we are than they; instead, we open doors to make others part of that belonging and belovedness too. And, using the soccer metaphor, we can focus on playing the game to the best of our abilities rather than worrying whether we deserve to be on the team.

I had once a church member named Neil who yearned to feel belovedness. But there was something standing in his way. I knew Neil had been divorced from his wife a few

years before I had come to that church, but I did not think much of it. Then, Neil fell in love with Justina, also an active member at our church. It was a very sweet romance, and the couple decided they wanted to get married within the order of worship for a regular Sunday morning church service, which is totally allowed and which I happily arranged. But Neil came to me before the wedding day, and told me that he needed to get some things off his chest. Neil confessed to me that he has remorse for things he knew he did wrong in his first marriage, that hurt his wife. He had a knowledge of what he did wrong, and was wise enough to know why he did these things, and I believe even wise enough that he would not do them again in his second marriage. But remorse still gnawed at his soul, and he asked me if we could create a kind of prayer space where he could confess what he had done, and ask God's forgiveness. Though he had apologized to his former wife, he rightly determined that the time had passed to ask for her forgiveness-- she had moved on, and it would be selfish of him to open that wound. So we created a space in the chapel where he could confess to me and to God all that he needed to confess. And together, we prayed for God's mercy and forgiveness, and for a clean slate so that he could find blessing in his marriage to Justina. I cannot begin to tell you the joy on Neil's face when he joined hands with his bride in worship several weeks later. He clearly trusted that God had given him a second chance at love, and at being loved, and I could see that what he had with Justina was a sign of his redemption.

The grace of God's love calls us to be better, to love better, and to experience love better. Two people walked into the Temple to pray. Maybe it was you. Maybe it was me. The gospel does not say what happened when they walked out, but perhaps we can make up the ending to that story. What will *you* do with God's mercy? What will you do with God's love? How will you share that belonging?