

**“THE CORE OF LIVING FAITH”**

**A Sermon by Richard D. Clewell**

**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**

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**Text: Luke 18:9-14 (N.T. p.81)**

A year ago last June in Birmingham the report of the taskforce on “Peace, Unity and Purity” was received by the General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church USA. This study engaged in for over four years by a diverse group of ministers and elders attempted to develop a better way to deal with issues over which there are disagreements within the denomination. Their process of respectful listening, honest exchange, prayer, and discernment as fellow Christians provided a hopeful model for how the larger church might function in its call to serve the Lord. They recommended no changes in the Book of Order as many were expecting but rather called for a coming together as God has directed to find our common ground in the way of Christ. Unfortunately, the suspicions surrounding the motives and intent of this taskforce report have produced further unrest among a number of churches with actions to withhold funds from the denomination or threats to withdraw totally from the denomination to a more purely doctrinaire group where issues of faith are defined and declared certain and immutable.

Now I must confess that I always get nervous when people demand purity of doctrine as the litmus test for faithful Christian living. Has there ever been a time when doctrine was pure? It seems to me that such concerns have much more to do with our human need to be right, to control, to play judge and jury to others than to do with anything God has revealed in divine expectations for humanity. It appears that every time we human beings experience a process of relating to God in meaningful ways, we immediately want to institutionalize the dynamic and legislate how all others should experience and declare their beliefs.

Throughout religious history we see this desire to capture and codify spiritual encounters into doctrinal directives and concrete laws which will curb our fears of alienation. The liberation found in being loved, forgiven and accepted just as we have been created by and reconciled to our God seems too gracious on its own. We want to earn it by obedience to our sacred doctrines and self-designed rules to live by. These tendencies are certainly evident throughout the history of Judaism and the years of church history.

Our Gospel text this morning is characteristic of the human responses to our connection to God and perhaps gives us a clue to the genuine core of living faith. (Read Luke 18:9-14) The introduction to this parable indicated that the audience intended was far larger than just targeting the Pharisees. Disciples and believers are just as vulnerable

to being self-righteous and exclusive as the Pharisee in the story. Followers of Christ in his day and in ours have to confront and account for such attitudes in our life in relationship to the Lord and to others. I'm sure many of us upon hearing Christ's word picture would adopt the position described by the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century New York preacher, William Ward Ayer, when he observed, "of course I'm talking to the person next to you in the pew." The final verse (v.14) expands the parable to all persons so that such limitation is not allowed.

This parable indicated different attitudes in relationship to God. The first man sees himself as righteous and apart from other human beings because he obeys the laws of his religion to the letter and is better attuned to be in God's presence. The second man, a traitorous tax collector, recognizes that his relationship to the Lord is not his righteousness but rather his need for God's mercy in forgiveness. Christ, who was a faithful Jew who challenged the religious institution, points out which man was in genuine relationship with God. I believe the core to living faith is epitomized in this story and in Jesus' teachings throughout the gospels.

An on-going relationship with God is grounded in continuing to experience divine grace through being loved in every circumstance, accepted as we are, and living as forgiven persons. An attitude that senses and accepts divine forgiveness opens a person to forgive and to be accepting of others' differences in experiencing their faith journeys. When we remain aware of God's grace in continuing to forgive us, we have no reason to be self-righteous and no need to judge others in order to feel better about ourselves. Such an outlook allows us to be more open to others as we are a community of the forgiven. In accepting others where they are in their spiritual process, we become inclusive rather than exclusive and are open to the on-going revelation of God in the living Christ.

In this tale, the self-righteous one feels that he earns God's blessing by keeping the commandments and tenets of his training, by fasting twice a week, tithing his income, and obeying the purity laws by curtailing physical contact. He keeps the Law as he understands it with due diligence. Yet, his prayer indicates an attitude of contempt for others, and absorption in his own perceived virtue. He asks nothing of God, and his basic assumption is that he is not a sinner but, in fact, is so pleasing that the Lord couldn't get along without him. There is no hint of humility nor sense of needed forgiveness nor graciousness toward his fellow sojourners. Do you know any people like this in your experience? Do you demonstrate this attitude in your own life? I realize I have and can easily do so again. In contrast, the tax collector has self-awareness and recognizes his own need for transforming mercy.

Philip Yancey, in his book, *Soul Survivor*, observes, "Concepts like grace and forgiveness, which constitute the core of the gospel, get little play in many theology books. I began to grasp why Jesus relied so strongly on story: The Prodigal Son says most of what we need to know about redemption and reconciliation; the Good

Samaritan most of what we need for ethics. Jesus contrasted a Pharisee who had a finely tuned theology with a sinner who could only cry for help – and it was the sinner’s cry, of course that God heard.”

What a difference there is between the parable’s characters! One is so sure that he knows all about God’s ways and his obedience to them that he separates himself from others as well as the Lord. The second is aware of his need for grace and forgiveness and belongs to the human community without any need to judge anyone. I believe that one of the truths taught by this parable is that people who trust in their own righteousness and religious system, will always compare, correct and then regard others with contempt. When they show disdain for others, they cannot bring themselves to rely on God’s grace or continue to experience it. The nature of grace is a paradox – only those who have learned empathy for others can receive it. In that regard, grace shares the nature of mercy and forgiveness. Only the merciful can receive mercy and only those who forgive will be forgiven. (Lk.6:36-38)

It is important for us to understand that God loves us not because of who we are or what we have done, but because of who God is. Grace flows to all who accept it. Jesus forgave an adulteress, a thief on the cross, a disciple who denied ever knowing him. Grace is absolute, all encompassing. It extends even to the people who nailed Jesus to the cross. Yancey describes this well, “In a world ruled by law, grace stands as a sign of contradiction. We want fairness; the gospel gives us an innocent man nailed to a cross who cries out, “Father, forgive them.” We want respectability; the gospel elevates tax collectors, prodigals, and Samaritans. We want success; the gospel reverses the terms, moving the poor and downtrodden to the head of the line and the wealthy and famous to the rear.”

Now, how does all this relate to the PUP report and the hard issues facing our denomination? If indeed grace is the core of living faith, then the Apostle Paul’s words certainly apply, “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” (Romans 5: 20b) We need to take seriously the oneness we have in Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah proposed, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord; though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18) In the shadow of God’s grace we can come together in a process of careful listening, respect toward sisters and brothers in Christ, prayer and discernment of God’s way in understanding and resolving theological differences. This is already occurring among some pastors and small groups in our presbytery. Through such a gracious process better understanding can be nurtured. It is much easier to know the truth than to seek it. But the life of faith is a journey through which we learn, unlearn, change and grow.

Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Seminary, in her book, *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity*, makes an interesting and helpful observation: “- - - another reason for being cautious about how to understand

religious truth is this. Theology is literally “talk about God.” Embedded in every notion of God is the understanding that human beings will never be able to comprehend God fully. God is Creator; we are creatures. The finite creature is by definition less than the infinite Creator. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.” (Isaiah 55:8) This is the real source of religious humility; the recognition that we are not God and that our ideas about God will never be complete until God brings all things to completion. “Now I know only in part,” Paul wrote (1 Cor. 13:12). This is the stance with which Christians should approach any question about who God is and what God is up to in the world. We can indeed say we know “truth” about God; what humans can never say is we know “the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

So we Presbyterians need to be clear that in our tradition, the word is “Reformed but always reforming,” not “conforming.” But above all in an attitude of grace, we are able to discuss, debate, change our minds, pray together and continue to love one another within the one community of faith knowing along with the late William Sloane Coffin “that Christians are at their best when they claim their God-given kinship with all humanity, offering prayers of thanks that there is more mercy in God than sin in us.” (*The Heart is a Little to the Left*)

Discipleship is a “following after Jesus” or a journeying with Jesus – listening to his teachings and trying to understand, traveling in his presence, eating at his table and being nourished by his Spirit, being in company and community with fellow faith sojourners, becoming compassionate, experiencing transformation and relationship with God and others as we grow in the likeness of Christ. Again the words of William Sloane Coffin in *Credo*, ring true, “The only security in life lies in embracing its insecurity. And faith in Jesus Christ, far from diminishing the risks, inspires the courage to take them on – all of them, including the risk of intellectual uncertainty.”

What matters most is not what biblical texts or church doctrines tell us we may believe but what humanity, reason, justice and Christ’s love tell us we ought to believe and do. May God help us to so live and to relate now and in the future.

Amen

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