

## ***The Bounty of Forgiveness***

**Joel 2:23 - 32; Luke 18:9-14**

The parable of last week, told by Jesus, encouraged the hearers to pray and not lose heart. This week Jesus uses another parable to teach all who hear the spirit that should pervade our prayers. This parable reminds us how we ought to pray.

As I read this passage and also prepared for our Sunday School class lesson about "Fear of the other", I realized that throughout this passage there are illustrations of "The Other" and how we often create distance between ourselves and "the others" in our lives.

"He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves and regarded others with contempt." The first verse sets the stage for division. In the book we are studying, Will Willimon writes, "We have met the enemies of Christ – us." And he quotes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a victim of Soviet repression and punishment, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties...but right through every human heart."

Though we may not be as openly judgmental as the Pharisee in this parable, all humanity has the tendency to compare self to "the other" that surrounds us. Jesus, God with Us, came to challenge everything we thought we knew about God. We expect a God of judgment and exclusion, but through Jesus we get mercy and inclusion. We crave unconditional affirmation of our righteousness and insider status, but Jesus calls us to even higher righteousness. Jesus brings unconstrained hospitality, inviting to his table people whom nobody thought could be saved, people whom nobody wanted saved. As Willimon puts it in, *Fear of the Other, No Fear in Love*, "Resisting the clutches of the powerful and the proud, Jesus condescended, touching the untouchable and lifting the lowly. In his suffering, loving outreach to us, in his truthful preaching, and in his resourceful, relentless drawing us unto himself, Jesus was other than the God we expected."

It is this "other" God that tells this parable illustrating the human tendency to hold our own righteousness above that of the other. Jesus challenges us to avoid trusting in our own efforts at fulfilling the law, and, rather, to humble ourselves before a merciful and loving God. Trust is necessary, but not in our ability. Jesus tells us to trust in the mercy of God. In a culture that values individual achievement this can be a challenge.

Therein lies the balancing act of Discipleship. Followers of Christ leave their regrets behind, trusting that God is merciful, sure to forgive our shortcomings. This does not require that we wallow in self-loathing. The liberation that comes with knowing that God is merciful and loving means that we can leave behind our reliance on our own achievements. It means that we are not at the center, God is the center and the

focus of our lives, the one in whom we find our hope, and the one that forgives, saves, and calls us his very own, despite our mistakes and shortcomings.

I am humbled by that realization. We are humbled by that realization. None of this is dependent upon me. The companion reading for this Sunday is from 2 Timothy 4:6-8 in which Paul speaks of his confidence that he has "finished the race" and "kept the faith" and that "the crown of righteousness" is reserved for him.

Balance is the key. We cannot trust in our ability to fulfill the law to save us, yet we do not abandon the law. We humble ourselves before a merciful God yet are confident in the Lord's promises. Whether you consider yourself a Pharisee or a tax collector by nature, all find welcome in God's sight. Amen.