

Sunday October 27th, 2019
20th Sunday after Pentecost

PRAYER: We cry to you, O God; answer us! Be merciful to us who have sinned! Rescue us from the lion's mouth! We have been cast into the den, a stone has sealed us in-we cannot save ourselves. We are not Daniel-our faith is frail-but stand by us, O God, and give us strength, and we will prevail. We will boldly proclaim your word, through the witness of our lips and the works of our lives! Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: God seeks to teach us to trust him to supply all our needs. God is the source of manna in our wilderness wanderings, the giver of the bread of life along the pilgrimage of our faith. Let us therefore bring to God our offering with praise and thanksgiving for his constant care and protection.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Precious God, you are the one who supports the righteous and troubles the self-righteous. You are the one who helps the faithful and grants hope to the faithless, you are our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Not only are you there just when we need you most. You are there before we even know how great our need is. You are there to confront us when we need confronting; to comfort us when we need to be comforted; to correct us when we need to be corrected; to commend us when we need to be commended. You are the answer-not only to our prayer but to our need. So we thank you for your readiness to honour us with your presence and for your determination to transform us by your presence.

From the dawn of history until this very moment, you have been with us, leading us away from temptation into the paths of righteousness. You endowed us with all the gifts necessary to discern your presence among us. You gave us a heart for understanding your motives, a mind for deciphering your will, eyes for discovering your purpose, ears for hearing your summons, and hands and feet for performing your commands. Yet, far too often we have let those gifts lie dormant. And now we find our own lives and the world itself is in trouble. Not because of your absence but because of our insensitivity to your presence.

You have been present to instruct us in the ways of peace with justice. You tried to teach us the wisdom of turning swords into plowshares, but we have turned them into tanks and missiles. You tried to teach us the wisdom of preventing conflict by eliminating hunger, but we have played politics and ignored poverty. You tried to teach us the wisdom of using persuasion rather than coercion, but we have practiced intimidation. With shame we confess, O Lord that we could have learned a great deal more from our history, if only we had acknowledged your presence and heeded your instruction. We must also confess that we have not profited as we should from your presence in the lives of your faithful ones. In them you gave us clues to your will, but we have preferred to follow our own.

Forgive us, O Christ, for having been such poor students of history and of humanity. Enable us to learn from experience-our own as well as the experience of others; help us to profit from mistakes-the mistakes of others as well as our own. Let us feel your presence at work in others for our sake; let others feel your presence at work in us for their sake.

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Luke 18:9-14
“Being a Better Person.”

The story goes that our beloved Prime Minister, Mr. Justin Trudeau, was on a state visit to Italy and was given the most beautiful bolt of cloth as a gift. Clearly this high-quality cloth was designed to be used as material for a brand new, custom made suit. Upon returning home to Canada, Mr. Trudeau decided to look into getting the material made into a suit, and since he was in his home riding in Quebec, he sought out a tailor there.

The tailor examined the cloth and confirmed it was high grade material, but there was really only enough for a jacket and a pair of pants. Mr. Trudeau thanked the tailor and decided to check out a tailor in Ottawa, where he was told that there was enough material for a jacket, pants and a vest. Thinking this was odd the discrepancy, Mr. Trudeau decided to try one more tailor and this time he went to the garment district in Vancouver.

This time, the tailor looked at the material and declared there was enough material for a jacket, a vest, and two pairs of pants. Something was a bit off in all of this, so Mr. Trudeau asked, “I don’t understand why in Quebec there is only enough material for a jacket and pants; in Ottawa there is enough to add a vest but here you can do all that plus an extra pair of pants. How can this be? The same bolt of cloth was shown to all three of you.”

The tailor smiled and said, “Mr. Prime Minister, it is an easy thing to explain. You see in Quebec you are a big man.” Politicians; we either like them or we despise them. Nowhere is this truer than right now following our election.

One of the things that can happen, in almost every election, and we experienced plenty of it recently; is the attempt by political opponents to dig up some scandalous dirt, to make the other candidate look less desirable to the electorate. In political circles we call it “mudslinging”. And so, the campaign machines of each respective candidate spend enormous resources researching and digging into their opponents’ past.

They look for: criminal charges, embarrassing photos like that blackface one of Trudeau, or comments made in the media, rumours, past voting records on key issues and then try and spin the dirt in a way that smears the candidate. So, I wonder, as a person considers running for political office, how much deliberation on their part goes into trying to remember anything that might come back to haunt them in the campaign?

What kind, and how much of this baggage is acceptable to the electorate? It must be difficult on some level to have your life scrutinized in such a very public way. To have any little embarrassment dragged up, like in Justin Trudeau’s case, in an effort to discredit you. The wisest course of action to prevent this problem in our own lives, we might conclude, is to hide these faults, or try and dismiss them in some way.

A person might argue that they were ill, under enormous stress, succumbed to a youthful indiscretion or some other excuse.

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We have heard all these excuses and we have even used them all. The baggage that politicians or celebrities carry is sometimes very public and very conducive to them being seen as a flawed person. It is really easy to hear or read about some indiscretion by a public figure, and with a real sense of self-righteousness condemn them or shake a finger and say, "How could they? They should have known better! I would never have done something like that."

We might even say a little prayer, "Lord, I thank you that I am not a sinner like those politicians or celebrities that I read about in the newspaper or see on TV. I never: cheat, I avoid sin, I stay off the "gravy train" and I don't embezzle funds or commit adultery. I go to church every week and even give a tenth of my income." Have you ever prayed something like this, or at least thought something like this? Be honest now!

It is very easy to ignore our own baggage when we focus on the struggles of others. We deceive ourselves into thinking that just because we have not killed someone or cheated on our spouses that we have nothing to unload before God. Perhaps we do recognize our own struggle, but erroneously believe it is so insignificant that God cannot be concerned about it when there are, what we believe to be, greater sinners all around us.

However, no matter how we spin it, we know this is not true. In secrecy, and in heavy silence, we carry overwhelming burdens. Burdens we know intimately. Burdens of: regret, sin, bad habits, self-righteousness, attitudes of prejudice and malice. I am sure, because I have done it myself, that we convince ourselves into believing nobody knows our secrets. If we just present ourselves as having it all put together, everything will be all right. After all, we don't want to be judged by others like that Pharisee.

We don't want our brokenness to be on display for the world, let alone our brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, by our secret hoarding of our broken and shattered existence, we have demonstrated that what truly matters most to me, is how others think of me; not how I think of myself, or how God thinks of me. In an effort to avoid: humiliation, embarrassment or judgment; we hide the truth about ourselves from each other and from God. We think to ourselves, "If they ever found out, I'd be mortified!"

And so, we suffer in silence and fear. We come each week to worship burdened, and yet we leave each week still carrying the load. Jesus pointed out that the tax collector in the story was justified before God, because he humbled himself and recognized his brokenness and estrangement from God.

His burden was great, but he left it with the only one who could take it away. The Pharisee also had unresolved sin and burdens, but he refused to admit it. He was blind to what he carried around. In his public persona he projected an air of righteousness that was false, and he may have fooled some people but he did not fool God for a moment. He may have been one of those Pharisees Jesus describes as wearing flowing robes, and parading in public and giving long over the top prayers in public places. We don't know the details of everything these two men carried into the Temple with them, but we do know that the Pharisee despite his assertion to clean living was a judgmental person.

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This meant he spent an enormous amount of his energy creating a veneer of respectability. I know that everyone in this room has a carefully crafted veneer to cover the truth about themselves. I know this, not because of things shared with me, but because it is the nature of humanity and my own personal experience. We think it is far easier to cover things up, than to have our dirty laundry hanging out so everyone can inspect it.

The pain and heart ache that some of you carry must be excruciating, but you hang on to it, because you fear if knowledge of what you carry got out, you would encounter plenty of judgmental Pharisees. You fear that if the truth were known, you might be thought of as less a person, or shunned by your church friends, or worse, the subject of rumour and innuendo. I cannot blame you for holding onto your struggles tightly.

I wish I could, but I cannot promise you that releasing your burdens, does not expose you to tremendous vulnerability. I cannot promise you that there are no Pharisees about, just waiting to find a chink in your armour to knock you down. Unfortunately, the one place on this planet where you should be able to unburden your soul, namely the church, is not often conducive, or safe enough for such an enterprise.

It is a terrible truth that often people do not fear confession before God, as much as they fear confession before other people. All of us, who have lived enough time, know the sting of condemnation not from God, but from others. We also know from experience that sometimes we end up going to church feeling beaten down by life only to leave feeling worse. Something is terribly wrong in this equation.

Philip Yancy in his book *What's so Amazing about Grace* tells a story that he says haunts him and ever since I first read it, it haunts me as well. It is the story of a friend of Yancy's who works in the poorest areas of Chicago...

A prostitute came to me in wretched straights, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter-two years old! -to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own for a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit.

I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing it made me legally liable-I'm required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last I asked if she ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd make me feel worse." (What so Amazing About Grace p.11)

Yancy then makes this vital point about this tragic story that in the bible, women much like this prostitute, fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Then Yancy asks, "Has the church lost that gift?"

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I wonder if the gift has been lost, not just for the down and out in our society, like the woman in the story, but even for us who sit here week after week. So, now I ask the hard question.

When we gather together as God's people, do we anticipate: hope, love, and forgiveness; or do we expect judgment, criticism, and manmade standards of respectability. I would like to remind us that Jesus told this story, Luke writes, "to some who had great self-confidence and scorned everyone else." The great sin in this story is not what the tax collector unburdened before the Lord.

It may not even be the judgmental attitude of the Pharisee, but rather the great sin here may be the way the Pharisee used his perceptions of the tax collector to avoid any relationship with him. The telling moment of this story for me is Jesus' observation, "The proud Pharisee stood by himself." He had created a buffer zone to preserve his sense of entitlement and self-righteousness.

How unlike Jesus. Except for times of prayer when he went off by himself, Jesus waded right into the humanity he encountered. For every category of human struggle and misery that could be used to isolate people, Jesus waded right into it and healed the estrangement between God and these lost souls. Jesus never stood by himself. Instead we see him swamped by "the lost sheep in need of a shepherd."

The most scathing, critical words Jesus ever utters, is directed not at: tax collectors, prostitutes or those infirmed by disease, but toward those who believed they were the most religious and faithful of God's followers. Jesus is the great physician who has come to heal the sick. Can you imagine being ill, calling your doctor, and being told that he or she only sees healthy people? How ridiculous!

Why then do we expect anyone to have it perfectly together before coming to Christ's people to encounter the great physician? Why do we think we who are here today, have to have it all together, or pretend to have it all together, before coming to meet our Saviour in this place? It's ridiculous! It is illogical! It certainly isn't Christ's picture of his church.

The church isn't ever supposed to "stand off by itself", saying to itself, "I thank you, God, that we are not like that sinful world out there." Instead, I think the church is supposed to be like a MASH unit. Have you ever seen that TV show from the 70's about the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in Korea? The point of that long running show was that the characters used humour to deal with the horror and stupidity of war.

As a MASH unit, the medical staff live and work as close to the front lines as they can. This is so the wounded can be treated quickly and stabilized, before sending them on to more established hospitals. This close proximity to the frontlines saves many lives. The church is a MASH unit. We are to be right up near the front, prepared to do what we can to heal the brokenness and wounds that people suffer out on the front lines of life.

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In the TV show MASH, the company clerk called Radar, seems to sense when the Evac helicopters are coming with the wounded. All he has to say is “choppers” and everyone springs into action; running to help the wounded. Every Sunday is like a call to all of us that there are “incoming wounded”. Maybe we are even one of them.

And Christ calls on us to spring into action: with love, acceptance and practical measures of help, all so the Great Physician can share his grace and mercy on us all. Our walk with Jesus is never about being the better person as compared to others; it is always about being the Christ like person to everyone we meet. Thank you, God, for your mercy to all of us who are sinners, and help us we pray to show that same mercy to others. Amen.

BENEDICTION: The time of our departure has come. Stand by us, O God, and give us strength, that we might fight the good fight, and run the good race, and keep the faith, from this day forth and forever. Amen.