

23 Pentecost, Proper 25, 2019  
October 27, 2019  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Joel 2:23-32   Psalm 65   2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18   Luke 18:9-14

What a celebration! I offer a sincere thank you to everyone here at Redeemer, to the diocesan staff, to our families and friends as we worshipped together last Wednesday, marking a very special day in our church life. From the joy of the music, a heartfelt – and story telling – sermon, sharing the Lord’s supper and then Janet Poleski’s delicious food, it was a memorable event. Everything was done with love and in love – the very best kind of celebration.

We accepted a way of life as we prayed:

Grant that we, with Catherine, may serve [God] now, and always rejoice in your glory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

That is our congregation’s call: to serve God and to rejoice in the fullness of God’s gifts and presence. For me, it was a weighty experience to proclaim my unworthiness, to devote myself “body, soul, and spirit” to God and God’s service, to pray out loud that my life and teaching will “set forth [God’s] true and living Word.” It is also a deeply joyful experience, one that fills my “body, soul and spirit” with awe beyond words; what an honor it is to serve our boundless God.

More than a few people expressed a sense of excitement about our call: “I wonder what God has in store for us?” Yes, let’s wonder, and pray, and glorify God in service to God’s creation. This congregation’s call and my call are entwined; together we go forward; together we laugh and mourn and pray and spill over with a level of abiding joy that we cannot contain. We will spill out that joy into the world in our many ways of ministry, each according to our own gifts.

Feeding  
Planting  
Sowing  
Listening  
Speaking  
Writing  
Pulling weeds  
Being silent

Waiting

Acting

Finding Jesus in one another

Dr. Suess titled a book “Oh, the places you will go!” Yes. The places we will go in the name of the living Christ!

Thank you God. What will you have us do in your name?

Now, today’s readings –

The book of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, was written about 2 centuries before birth of Christ. Sirach functioned as an instruction book for wealthy students – young men – for how to act with wisdom. Sirach tried to adjust the view of the rich, instructing students to look at worship through the eyes of God. The context of this instruction is worship that included literal animal sacrifice. Sirach asks “what sort of sacrifice will please God?” A humble heart. Humility allows people to treat others the way God treats them. Without partiality. No bribe or show of piety can replace the humble heart. [12-14] Centuries before the birth of Jesus and his ministry, people are told that humility, not self-promotion, is the posture of prayer.

Luke shows us opposite types of prayer:

One is full of self-proclamation; the other, self-abasement. Was not the tax collector showing humility?

We know that Luke wants us to know about the word and work of God, and here it is in two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector. In spite of what we may think – we know that we are supposed to dislike the Pharisee, right? – neither man is a good example of prayer.

The Pharisee, an educated person of study of the law (Moses’ law), tells God about his practices of faith/piety: he fasts more and tithes more than what is required in the law. Thanks be to God, he says, that I am not “those” people. The problem with the Pharisee’s prayer is that it is focused on himself and NOT on God. Look at **me**, he says, and look at me compared to someone else.

One of “those” people, a tax collector, is our other pray-er. His head is bowed, a literary sign of humility, and he is beating his chest, a sign of remorse. I am nothing, I have nothing ... help.

It is the tax collector in in Luke's gospel who goes home justified because he is the one who showed humility. In society, he is not an honored man, but the kingdom of God is open even to him. All of the welcoming is the work of God.

There is our message: we cannot do the work of God alone. We are not called to stay forever in a state of misery, but to get up, be fed by Jesus, and go into the world. We are not to hold in our hearts the comparisons with which we are familiar: thank God I'm not that person. Prayer is not a finite thing; we can all have more, much more!

We all have a call to humility, to present ourselves fully before God. That is the posture of prayer: humility. Sirach had it partially right; prayer is not made only for elite men, but for the whole world, without judgment of another. We cannot manipulate God, and God loves us all. The Pharisee can be redeemed. The tax collector can be redeemed. You and I? Can be redeemed.

Our role in the parable is to take these words into our own hearts and ask ourselves:

Are we praying without ceasing – meaning often, every day? This is an encouragement – any way we pray is okay when we pray to God and not for the benefit of others. “Help” is an acceptable prayer. “Help her because she is clearly a sinner and I am not” might need some reflection and amendment.

What is your – our – prayer posture?

If quiet and a candle helps, then light a candle. If music turns your soul to God, then play music and glorify God. If dance brings your heart into the presence of God, then dancing it is. Prayer is not ABOUT our relationship with God. Prayer is our relationship with God, made manifest in many ways, body, soul and spirit.

I wonder what it is that God will have us do? With God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, let us pray.