

Union's Why

October 23, 2022

Morality v. Moralism

If we're honest, we've all been there. Sometimes self-righteous like the Pharisee and at other times humble like the tax collector.

In our Gospel today, we encounter the Pharisee being self-aggrandizing. It's interesting: his behaviors set him within the law – he fasts twice a week and gives 10% of his income. On paper, his faith life is a model. But when he prays...oh, when he prays!

In the set up for this passage, we're told Jesus told this parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." (It's nice that every once in a while, the Gospel writers tell us the punchline before we even begin. This is a lesson about being self-righteous, about trusting only in ourselves, and about thinking less of others.)

We don't have to look far to find this kind of behavior, if we even look outside of ourselves at all. So much of what passes as Christianity today doesn't pass the smell test, would fall firmly in the Pharisee's camp: people who fight taking care of the poor and needy, people who would build walls and spend millions to keep people away from safety and resources, people who believe that there is ONE political issue that defines whether you're Christian or not, rather than relationality and authenticity.

But ope! I've gone and done it myself, haven't I? One of the lessons that IS SPELLED OUT in the set up of this parable is looking at others with contempt, or really, comparing oneself to others and in your head thinking there's a hierarchy of who God loves and who God doesn't.

That's one of the reasons I love the passage that I asked Sandy to read from the Book of Sirach today. It weaves together with our Gospel in helping us to remember that God's relationship with us is with the real, true, deep, authentic us, not the face we try to put forward, not what we want to show, but who we really are. It includes the idea that God will not take a bribe.

In Bible Study on Tuesday, we unpacked that idea a little bit. What does it look like to try to "bribe" God? Probably the easiest is the "if/then" prayer. "God, if you get me out of XYZ, I will behave differently."

A couple of years ago, I posted a meme that read, "For those of you who made a promise to God in the last moments of the Packers game, worship on Sunday is at 10 a.m. at 716 S. Madison Street." That's my way of poking fun at this idea of bribing God. Of course it doesn't work like that; if you do this thing I'm interested in, then I'll behave differently.

The contrasting character in our Gospel is humble, praying, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." It's a simple prayer, but even more than what is said, I think it's beauty lies in what is not said. The tax collector doesn't compare himself to others in their prayer. This person doesn't say, "I'm a worse sinner than the Pharisee." Doesn't say, "At least I'm not a sinner like so-and-so." The tax collector is simply honest.

Again, I think some of the synergy between our Gospel and our passage from Sirach is that they both tell us not to compare ourselves to others. So much of what ails society is rooted in comparison:

- They have more than I do.
- She's prettier or thinner or richer.
- At least I don't drink as much as they do.
- At least I don't fool around.
- At least I go to church.
- At least my ancestors came here legally.

Sirach says that God doesn't do partiality, whether we're poor, whether we've tried to make God an offer God can't refuse. God's bigger than all of that. And wiser than all of that.

Union's Why

Throughout the last month, as part of our Stewardship Season, I've been walking you through making a collage on the wall to my left. It's based on the work of Simon Sinek who suggests that great leaders and organizations are able to clearly articulate their "why," that is why they exist and why that matters. In order to get to clarity about our church's "why," we first articulated our "what" and "how." What does Union do that is interesting or important or impactful, and how do we do those things?

Today, we get to the really exciting part: Why do we do those things? Again, I've asked our Administrative Assistant, Eric, to put some Post-its in each of your bulletins. On them, I'd like you to take some time answering these questions:

- What do you love about Union?
- When have we seen Union at its best?
- Why does this church matter to God?

If you're a visitor or new to the church, go ahead and answer more broadly. After worship, please post your "whys" of this church on the door in between the "whats and hows." It's wholly by accident, but absolutely appropriate that we're posting these on a door, much like Martin Luther posted his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral 405 years ago next week.

We're not only lifting up our church at its best, we're also articulating vision – what we should be – and may even be clarifying what we need to double down on and what it might be reasonable to cast away. We're undertaking this exploration of Union's why amidst our Stewardship Season in which we're asking people to prayerfully consider their financial commitments to the church for next year, as well as engaging in a Capital Campaign Feasibility Study because having a sense of why we exist and why this church matters – to God, and to the world – we hope will bring renewed passion and integration. I hope that the reasons this church matters to God matter to you, too.

Scriptures

One of the reasons that Union matters that I hear often is that it's a faith community in which people can have intellectual integrity. More succinctly, it's a church where you don't have to check your mind at the door.

That's why, while Jesus' examples of the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble tax collector give us important insights into a life of faith and how God works, I'm grateful to pastor a church where I can lift up yet a third character. For our purposes today, as we contemplate how to truly be ourselves with God, along with the Pharisee and the tax collector, it's also important for us to lift up a character whose spirituality is almost as dangerous as the Pharisee: the person who is falsely modest. Like our other two characters, a lot of how this person understands their faith and their relationship with God comes from what they were taught and what they gleaned from society. The Greco-Roman philosophical underpinnings of the majority of scriptural interpretation over the last 2000 years has been hierarchical. That is, top down. In order for God to be supreme, we must be below, less than.

The problem is that, over time, this notion has spiraled wildly out of control, to the point that a substantial subset of Christianity today takes as a foundational premise the idea that humans are inherently awful. Just the other day, I heard a colleague say, "I know that I'm not half good enough to deserve God's forgiveness nor God's blessing nor God's love." Friends, that's just as unrighteous as the Pharisee. Do we need God? Absolutely. Do we all sin and stray from Godly paths? Yes. Does it serve humanity well to imagine that our relationship with God, a relationship that we say should be the best, healthiest, most nourishing relationship possible would be founded on our unworthiness? No! In fact, I apologize to you parents who are going to have to explain to your kiddos why they heard pastor swear today, but HELL NO. In Genesis, God created human beings and called us very good. In our baptisms, we are told that we are God's beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Conclusion

And so, if you have any take-away from today, I hope that it is a readjustment of the lens through which you see your relationship with God and the people of God, not seeing yourself better than others, not seeing yourself as unworthy of God's love, but rather planting yourself firmly in the truth. Our relationship with God is not a comparison with others. We sin and stray. The myth of our unworthiness is a lie perpetuated by folks who still haven't been able to find their way free from a hierarchical notion of who is in and who is out. God cannot be bought. And most of all, we are / YOU are wholly and completely beloved. May this truth seep into every fiber of your being. Alleluia and Amen.

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Sirach 35:12-17, Luke 18:9-14
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