

Sermon – “Setting Ourselves Apart”

Sunday, August 9, 2015

Scripture Lessons – I Kings 8:22-30, 41-43, Luke 18:9-14

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Our first scripture reading is I Kings, chapter 8, verses 22-30 and 41-43. This is Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the newly constructed Temple in Jerusalem during the 10th century BCE. Let us open our hearts and minds to the Word of God.

22 Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. 23 He said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, 24 the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. 25 Therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, "There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' 26 Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David. 27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! 28 Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; 29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. 30 Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

41 "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name 42 —for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, 43 then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

Both of our scripture readings focus on prayer. Our second scripture is Luke, chapter 18, verses 9-14. Almost a millenium following Solomon's reign, Luke records this parable of two men praying in the temple. Although this is not the original temple Solomon built, which was destroyed at the time of the Babylonian Exile around 587 BCE, this temple shared a common foundation. Luke has the distinction of being the only non-Jewish New Testament writer. He was a Gentile and a physician. His gospel places special emphasis on outsiders and has sometimes been called “The Gospel for the Gentile.” Perhaps his own experience helped him identify with those who stood alongside him in the outer courts of the temple. Listen for the Word of God.

9 Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The title of the sermon: “Setting Ourselves Apart”

The text: “The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying, thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people.’” Luke 18:11a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, remind us often that you cannot be contained by human hands or framed by the human mind. As we reflect together on Scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Not only for the sake of discussion but also on behalf of the *Pharisee* in each of us, I’d like to say a few words on their behalf. The literal translation of the word Pharisee is separate ones. This group of religious men did not come into existence until about 100 years before the birth of Christ when there was an attempt to stamp out Judaism under Greek rule.

Remember that Jews lived under the rule of larger empires throughout most of their history. Some empires were more tolerant than others. Greek culture and influence were threatening the very life of Judaism. In an effort to survive, the Pharisees were formed. If there is ever a time to set ourselves apart, perhaps this was the time.

Remember also, that the Jews believed God was on their side, if they were righteous. Righteousness came through the keeping of the law. Over the years their hope for righteous leadership from their kings was disappointed again and again. King Solomon was no exception. The Messiah would come through the righteous remnant to establish the political rule of Judaism. In effect, the Messiah would save them from foreign rule in their land.

The Pharisees, as a means of assuring this righteous remnant dedicated their lives to the careful and meticulous observance of the law. In order to do this, they separated themselves from ordinary life. Every waking moment was spent in keeping the law. There were never many Pharisees, no more than a thousand in total. They were a part of Judaism until about a hundred years after the death of Christ. They dissolved following the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of temple, around 75 CE. This initiated the beginning of the Diaspora of the Jews throughout Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Some Pharisees were devoted to God and others were arrogant moralists, however this is true in all religious groups. It would be too easy for us to write off the Pharisee in our parable by saying he was one of those arrogant moralists. The truth is, we don’t really know how sincere his man was.

Let’s resist the temptation of reading this Middle Eastern parable with our western eyes and perspective. Our culture is noted for the presence of a hero and a villain in literature—polarizing morality, making life an either or.

We need not interpret the Pharisee as a villain anymore than we interpret the tax collector as a hero. The preacher does no one any favors if we walk away from this message thanking God we are not a Pharisee. Life isn’t that simple and neither is this parable. It’s not a matter of one being good and the other being bad. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector had their good and bad character traits.

This story is rather about one's approach to God, and in particular, how one approaches God in prayer. The Abbingdon Bible Dictionary points out that what the Pharisee was praying out loud was very similar to the prayer every Jewish boy was taught.

My God, I thank thee I was not born a Gentile, but a Jew; not a slave, but a free man; not a woman, but a man.

George Buttrick makes a provocative statement in the Interpreters Commentary. He writes: *What we think of ourselves and our neighbors stems from what we think about God.*

Why wouldn't the Jewish man pray that he was thankful he was not a Gentile, slave or woman. He was taught from his religion that the only righteous in Yahweh's eyes were circumcised, male Jews. There were allowances for others, as we read in Solomon's prayer, however they remained set apart in the outer courts of the Hebrew temple.

And so when we hear the Pharisees' private prayer, we get a glimpse at what he thought about God. Rather than approach Yahweh in a confession of how he had fallen short, he rattled off what qualified him as one of the righteous remnant. He didn't pray, he informed God of how good he was.

Luke writes in verse nine: *Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*

Sure, the Pharisee trusted his own righteousness. Why wouldn't he? His faith taught him the ways of righteousness and he worked hard at it. I might add he went the extra mile. The law did not require private fasts, and he fasted two days a week. He was very generous as well. Although Deuteronomic law requires a tithe only on agricultural products, this Pharisee tithed all his income. He was respected within the community and for good reason. He took his faith very seriously.

What about this business of *regarding others with contempt* or as the Revised Standard Version translates *those who despised others*. On the Pharisee's behalf, he genuinely believed that Yahweh despised the unrighteous and if Yahweh despised them, surely he could as well. In fact, he should! Hating this tax collector was not inconsistent with the Pharisee's faith. Rather, one could say—it was consistent with what he thought about God.

What we think of ourselves, and our neighbors stems from what we think about God.

What do we think about God?

What would someone learn from listening to a few minutes of our prayer life?

How have we set ourselves apart from the rest of God's children?

In recent years with the continued unrest in the Middle East, my ambivalence about being a Christian has sometimes surprised me. It's not that I want to be a Jew or a Moslem. Actually there is a part of me, at times that doesn't want any part of religion because of the destructive impact the power struggles among people of faith can have on our world.

How true are the words Solomon spoke. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built?" I would only remind Solomon that he did not build that house, hundreds, perhaps thousands of dedicated laborers, working side by side, built that house.

Gregory Boyd, in his book “The Myth of a Christian Nation,” articulates a concern among Christians today, namely that patriotic zeal is being confused with Christianity. As an evangelical pastor, Reverend Boyd felt pressure to conform to certain political agendas, and when he did not, he felt like an outsider. He contends there is danger when one associates the Christian faith too closely with any political view, whether conservative or liberal. When the kingdom of God is revealed, it will wear the face of Jesus Christ. And that, according to Reverend Boyd, has never been true of any earthly government or power.

And so Christ’s parable is as relevant for twenty-first century Christians as it was for first century Jews. This message from Jesus is universal and important for all of us who claim we know something about God.

The Apostle Paul summed it up this way: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. I Corinthians 13:1-3*

It was the man who stood at a distance in God’s temple rather than the man who set himself apart from his fellow human beings who knew something about God. It was the man who despised himself rather than the man who despised others who knew something about God. It was the man who bowed his head and asked for mercy rather than the man who stood tall and exalted himself who knew something about God.

The Pharisee had enough religion to be virtuous, but not enough to be humble. By separating himself from other people he unwittingly separated himself from God.

The ironic tragedy of this religious man’s life, Jesus teaches in this parable, is that he never knew the God to whom he dedicated so much of himself. He never experienced the joy of God’s abounding mercy or the wisdom of God, which gives understanding and teaches respect and acceptance of others. May it not be so for each of us. Amen.