

*Lord, Have Mercy*

Lessons: Joel 2:23-29; Luke 18:9-14

Prayers of confession in your bulletin come from lots of sources...the Presbyterian Book of Worship, prayers of history, prayers I write or others have written. We call them “common prayers” because they address the failures we all share in our humanity. And they point us to the dark shadows in our souls where we hide our secret sins – the sins we even try to hide from ourselves.

When I was in my first pastorate as a Presbyterian minister, one of the church members came up after worship in the third month or so and said, “I’m not happy with the Prayers of Confession lately. Since you have come, they talk about sin a lot. We Presbyterians are not as bad as some churches. I wish they were more positive.”

Pharisee – “seeking to justify himself,” says the text. How much of prayer is an attempt to get God to agree with our opinions about ourselves. Thank God I’m not like those other people, ...and surely, God knows.

Thank God I’m not like

...those awful Muslims. (They are all terrorists, you know.)

...those mega-church entrepreneurs. (They are all money-hungry, you know.)

...those self-righteous Baptist fundamentalists. (We all know about them.)

We are really good at thanking God for what we are NOT. We are especially good at thanking God we are not like those people who think they are better than others. In fact, we are much better at NOT thinking we are better than those people are. ...Maybe there is a little more Pharisee in all of us than we think.

The Pharisee was busy looking at how bad everyone else was. The Pharisee was so busy congratulating himself that he could not see himself – only the false image he had made of himself. It was a protection – a mechanism to insulate himself from needing to admit that he could be a better person than he was.

Good Presbyterians are not good at self-congratulation. We are more prone to self-deprecation. We like to congratulate ourselves that we are not so good. Really, it’s sort of the opposite protection to the same end. Ask someone to do something, and just listen...

Oh, I’m not very good at that.

Oh, I just don’t have the gifts for this.

Oh, there are so many people who would be better than I am.

Oh, it’s not in my genes.

Oh, I’ve tried to work on that problem, but I just have to have the grace just to accept who I am.

It’s another version of the Pharisees prayer; aren’t we trying to “justifying ourselves”? In a strange way, we are turning attention to others to avoid focusing on ourselves. Whether we just say we don’t have anything defects or we find all kinds of excuses for our defects, we are

playing games with ourselves to avoid seeing ourselves honestly – and, yes, to avoid naming what we need to change about ourselves.

There is a difference between confession and making excuses. We don't want to congratulate ourselves, but we don't want to confess and be forgiven, either. We want to make excuses so that we can avoid going to work on the difficult things that we might do to make ourselves into who we want to be – the people we know God wants us to be.

Deep down is the place where the truth really hurts. Deep down we want to be that better person, but it is so hard that we think it impossible for us – so we either deny our own desires and invent an image, or we make excuses for why we can't.

How many of us, or how few of us, are really like the Tax-Collector? He's not trying to avoid anything, he just puts it out there. He names his problem as his need, and he wants to do something about it. He is honest that he can't do much about it by himself, and he needs help to turn from his problem – his sin – because he confesses he needs to turn from his sin.

So he prays for mercy! He prays to God to do what he cannot do. He prays for power to change the things he cannot change. His gift to us is the easy honesty to admit we can't do it ourselves and we need the power – the mercy that makes change possible.

Most of us know someone – or have heard testimonies from someone – or have personal experience – or ought to have personal experience - in a twelve step program. "Bill" of Alcoholics Anonymous just admitted the obvious, and started a movement: he was powerless, he needed God's power, he had to be honest about his life and his sin, and he had to make amends and go to work at the hard, long living of a different life. And he could not do it without the help of others who were trying, too. And everyone needs God's help.

Confession ends denial. Forgiveness makes turning possible. Mercy makes the next steps possible – one after another.

Mercy is a powerful thing! Mercy is a wonder-full thing. Forgiveness helps us see ourselves – not in the mirror of our own shadows and fantasies – but in the bright vision and hope of God. Forgiveness shines a different light on us, and lets us see who we are in God's creating. We can be honest about the shadow we have cast by our own creating.

But mercy does much MORE! Mercy says we can do something about it! Mercy says we have the power of the God who forgives and saves; and God and us can go to work on the problem we deny or the defect we accept too easily. Mercy helps us dream dreams and see visions, like Joel the prophet promised. Mercy gives us courage to step toward the vision we see in God's light.

I've been coming to church and leading worship for a long time. More and more, I just show up for the mercy. I come for the Prayer of Confession. I come for the forgiveness, and I'm big on the mercy. I come for the power in the mercy. I have some things I cannot change, and I can change them with the power that is in God's mercy. The whole point of confession is to get honest about our lives so we can do something about our lives. It's not about just beating up on

ourselves. Asking for mercy is just admitting we can't do it alone, and admitting that we can do it with God.

The Pharisee and the tax collector were both sinners. The difference was that the Pharisee used self-justification to avoid facing what he needed to change in himself. The tax collector used confession to put who he was in front of God and say, "Help me with this."

So, my own prayer of confession for today: Lord, have mercy on me. Wash me in your mercy. Gift me to be honest about my defects and my unwillingness to work on them, and help me to see beyond that judgment of myself to the person I can be by your mercy. Help me to live in the power of mercy.

You have heard it – "Confession is good for the soul," we say. All of us have something to confess. That is why we have a prayer of confession in worship. The prayer points us to the mercy. The gift in the forgiveness is the power to do something about it. Confession is a start, and then we go to work in God's power to do what we cannot do without God's power.

The confessing is at the beginning of worship in Presbyterian services as a gift God gives us and we give each other. We have common sins. We are all sinners. We say the prayer together and we give each other the gift of honesty. And we announce together that we are forgiven, and give each other the gift of peace that comes in the mercy. The rest of worship – the praying and proclaiming and responding and dedicating and sending – is devoted to putting the mercy to work.

I was on the ordained staff at Duke Chapel. The couple wanted to be married at the Chapel – not because it was a beautiful cathedral, but because their minister would not perform the ceremony. He was an orderly at the hospital. She was a waitress. She was 20 years old. She had a 5 year old daughter. I did the math. She told me the story I had already guessed. Their Pharisee of a minister would not perform the marriage. He said she had sinned.

We talked, and I told her that God was a forgiver. Of course she had done something wrong. We all have. And God had given her forgiveness in this child, and a gift of a new life with someone who loved her. This marriage would give both of them a new life. She began to sob. I'm trained in these things. I knew I had pushed some deep button. "What have I said? I don't want you to think..."

"Everyone has either judged me or patted me on the back and said it was OK. You are the first person in church who has let me confess my sin."

Condemning people may make us feel better, but it does not help them with their problems. We need to stop condemning people. And patting people on the back in a kind of co-dependent enabling may make them feel better and make us feel like we are helping without helping, but it does not help people with their problems. Sitting back and letting people to continue to hurt themselves is NOT compassion. And keeping our distance by staying silent and condemning them is not gracious.

Blessed are the merciful, said Jesus. Being merciful means we are full of mercy. We are full of the power of a God who does not look at other people in their sin but sees who they are in the light of God's saving grace. We are called to look at people in the light of God's mercy.

I saw the movie “Blind Side” this week. It’s a true story about a young man from the projects and a woman who was not from the projects who sees him in the different light. It documents the definition of mercy. It’s easy to see someone in all their difficult surroundings and their innate limits and their incapacities and problems. But mercy is the refusal to see people in any light but God’s light, the refusal to let people see other people except in God’s light, and the refusal to let the people we love see themselves in any light but the light of God’s mercy. Mercy is the commitment to the hard work that goes with walking with people in God’s light. Mercy means people have God’s power to do what they cannot do alone. Mercy means we are the people who can walk with other people to be their help and strength when they are weak and helpless. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful.” Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others.”

Jesus said we will be blessed when we are full of mercy to others, and that is when we will receive mercy. We Christians live under the mercy of the Savior who loves us, and it is time we trusted the power – this saving power, this amazing grace – of Christ’s mercy. Lord, have mercy! Let’ put this power to work.

I’ve about decided that working at the mercy, and dishing it out to everyone I see, is the skill and the gift I don’t have enough of. I’m going to work at the mercy. I want to be big on the mercy. I figure the more I give, the more I will receive ...so the more I can give.

So, let me add to my prayer today: Lord, have mercy on me. Do more than show me your mercy. Give me more than I need. Give me mercy to give. Help me pour out your mercy. Have mercy on all of us. Give us all the mercy that will turn us from the shadows of the secret sins we hide even from ourselves. Help us to dream your dream for us. Help us to see your visions for all of us. Help us to walk in your light – the Savior who lights the world with mercy – until we all do more than dream. ...Until we live in the joy and peace of the hard work that comes from living the new life. Amen.