

Sermon: To God be the Glory
Reverend Lisa Eleck
Olivet Congregational Church
10/23/2022

2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

¹⁶At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! ¹⁷But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Luke 18: 9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." 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!" 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.'

Sermon: To God be the Glory

That phrase, taken from Paul's words to Timothy, "to him be the glory forever and ever" has special meaning to me now. It is personal. It has special meaning.

Not long before the pandemic, one of my good friends from both Hartford Seminary and Yale Divinity School became ill while on a mission trip with other clergy to South Korea. He became gravely ill, was hospitalized and put on a ventilator so his wife and son could see him. They were flown out to South Korea. He died with them at his bedside.

His name was John. I attended his funeral. Individuals from the churches he pastored as a student minister and as a pastor, spoke at his funeral. They shared his response to whenever someone praised something he did. He would say, "to God be the glory." Those were consistently John's words, "to God be the glory." And those words were meant in all sincerity. John was extremely intelligent, a man of great faith, a wonderful pastor, a true friend you could always rely on, an overall great guy. And he was humble.

I always thought that he was meant to be a pastor. I witnessed his actions when we were student ministers at our different internship sites. I heard his words for others as he prayed aloud in a group and for me when something felt overwhelming. He had, like I had, become a minister later in life. It was sad for me that he was only able to live his dream of being a pastor for such a short time. But his dream did come true. And he touched many people.

Now John would not want me to be telling you how wonderful he was. Not because it isn't true, but because he was very humble.

I'm sure that if you stop for a moment, you can think of a person or even people who have great gifts but truly do not see themselves as gifted or who give extravagantly but do not think of themselves as generous. We know people who go above and beyond what you would expect anyone to do, and think nothing of it. And they do it without seeing themselves as exceptional or expecting praise. I imagine you can think of someone right now. They are humble.

In today's parable, one of those stories Jesus tells to make us think, we hear about a humble tax collector and a not so humble Pharisee. Jesus tells us it's a story about those who trust in themselves, are righteous and, and I think this is really important, who regard others with contempt. I think that's the clincher here.

Jesus talks about the Pharisee. Now the Pharisee is not a bad guy. He does good stuff. He fasts twice a week. He pledges one tenth of all his income. He adheres to the religious laws and customs of the day. To get to a position of responsibility in the faith community, he has to be knowledgeable about his faith and follow the law. And this man even thanks God - that he is not like "those other people – adulterers, thieves, sinners, yes, and tax collectors." This Pharisee does what he is supposed to do. He prays, fasts, tithes. And he thanks God. Yet in the midst of thanking God he considers himself better than others. He looks down on others.

Jesus says that those who humble themselves will be exalted and those who honor themselves will be humbled.

The tax collector asks for God's mercy, calling himself a sinner. He did not even consider himself worthy to go all the way into the temple. He beats his breast and asks for God's mercy. Now, in Jesus' day, as you

know, tax collectors were looked down upon. They cooperated with the Roman occupiers. They collected taxes for the Romans. It was how they made their livelihood – cooperating with the enemy. And on top of it, they often padded their own pockets, stole from their fellow countrymen. We do not know whether this tax collector stole any money or if he did steal money, how much he stole. We do know that he asks for God’s mercy. In humility, he admits that he is a sinner. And for his humble prayer made at the back of the temple, asking for God’s mercy, Jesus says the tax collector went home justified. He went home still a tax collector, still despised by the community, but in his heart – he asked for mercy. In Jesus’ heart and mind and words, he received mercy.

Now, I don’t know if anyone here begins his or her prayer with “be merciful to me God, I am a sinner.” But I do see most people here as humble and as doing good works without asking for recognition. And I don’t think we come to church and say, “God, thank you for making me better than those people who stayed home, warm and cozy in bed this morning. I support this church with my pledges and my actions. Look at me God.” No, I don’t see that either.

But only we know, in our hearts, if there have been times we have been critical of others or thought of ourselves as better than someone else. Have we been reluctant to give to a stranger who asks for money, believing that all who beg only buy cigarettes, alcohol or drugs? Have we been critical of a mother who is speaking Spanish to her child while in the grocery store, thinking she should be speaking English? Have we been annoyed at the car ahead of us, spewing black smoke and smelling bad, thinking that the owner should have had that repaired, without knowing their financial situation? Have we believed that anyone who shows up at a food pantry in nice clothes or a nice car is abusing the system?

Only we know what is in our hearts, only we know what we think of others. But sometimes, when one comes to a realization of what they are doing, they are humbled. And they share their stories.

Richard Crenna, the actor, is one such person who shared his story. Richard grew up in a hotel – actually, his description made me think of a rooming house though he called it a hotel. There were 72 guests. And Richard's family's home was only 2 rooms. His parents owned the hotel, but it certainly did not make them rich. He reports being disappointed as a young boy because he did not have a Christmas tree. His Christmas tree was the one in the lobby. And he did not have a special Christmas dinner with his parents. His Christmas dinner was a meal in the hotel restaurant. His Christmases weren't like all the Christmases his friends at school described.

The residents of the hotel were gamblers, bookies, ex-jockeys, alcoholics, a germ-o-phobe that he called Germ Man, a would-be actress, and a thief who Richard said actually stole a canoe by carrying out of an Abercrombie and Fitch store to the hotel and then went back to the store the next day for the paddles. Simply stated, the residents of this hotel were not upper class society.

Now Richard lived close to the NBC and CBS studios. He would go to those studios and rummage through their trash for discarded scripts. He and a friend would then rehearse these scripts, and act them out at school. But what was key to Richard's acting, was that he used to mimic the residents of the hotel. He did this to make others laugh. He even learned how to fall down the stairs without hurting himself to mimic the alcoholics. The scripts and his antics, his imitation of the residents of the hotel, actually got him his start in radio.

One day he was given a wonderful opportunity; to go to NYC to audition. It was Christmas time. He was in his room, preparing to leave for NYC. His mom called him down to the hotel lobby where the

residents had gathered. The Christmas tree was up. Carols were playing. It was a combination Christmas party and going away party.

All the residents congratulated him. Some even had very thoughtful presents for him – handkerchiefs, a pocket knife, and luggage. The guy who had stolen that canoe, gave him a set of expensive luggage that was monogrammed. It wasn't even stolen. Richard commented, "I didn't know they cared."

Those men and women whom he had looked down upon, whom he had mimicked and made fun of, in Richard's words. "were paying me back with kindness and encouragement." He went on to say, "The men and women I had once written off as has-beens and weirdos were instead children of the Most High. For the first time, I could see that people are equal...that you love people for what they are, not what you wish them to be." And as he rode the train to NYC, he told another passenger that it was his "best Christmas ever, I spent it... with my family."

Luke tells us Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Jesus wanted his listeners to understand that looking down on others was a problem, saying, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Both the tax collector and the Pharisee were sinners. The tax collector humbly admitted it to God. The Pharisee may not have realized it at the time, but his opinion of himself and others, his arrogance made him a sinner.

Depending on the situation, it is possible for each of us to be a tax collector asking for God's mercy or a Pharisee thinking we are better than another person. Perhaps we can be both, but at different moments in our lives. In reality, we are all sinners. We all have reason

to come to God for mercy. We all depend on God's mercy, on God's grace. We are all children of our God who loves us.

So let us ask God to shine his merciful light on our lives for us to see ourselves as God sees us. Let us ask God to transform our lives so that we humbly praise God with what we say and do through our relationship with others. May we not strive for glory but may our lives glorify God.

To God Be the Glory.

Bausch, William J. A World of Stories of Preacher and Teachers. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998) pp 69-72.