

Sermon for Sunday, October 23, 2016

Humble Hearts

Luke 18:9-14

First of all I want to share my joy in being here today. I am beyond excited about having the opportunity to join you all in worship and I am incredibly blessed to be considered for the associate pastor of member care position here at Ladue chapel. So many thanks to you all for coming this morning and to all of you who helped to get me here today.

I have had the pleasure of meeting a good number of you all, and you all have been on my heart and mind. As I prepared for this morning, I began to pray about you all, and the scriptures lit right up for me. Joel talks about the spirit of God poured out on all people- and that spirit is present here. I have seen that spirit more specifically present in the humble hearts of those I have had the pleasure of meeting here, the kind of hearts that Jesus talks about in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. So today I want to focus on what humility looks like when it is properly placed in the heart, as inspired by Christ.

Humility is a buzz word among the successful. The Harvard Business Review published an article about the success of leaders possessing humility. It discusses six ways to harness that humility to further your own success. Two from that list that stood out to me were: 1) know what you don't know-which confesses a humble inability to know everything- and 2) listen to others- which confesses a humble inability to be the only person with the best ideas. While the explicit material of the article outwardly notes that success in the secular world often requires going so far as to adopt a potentially false humility by taking on formulaic behaviors that exude an air of humility, the article implicitly suggests that confession is a starting point for success. The article does not talk about confession, but as I understood it, numbers one and two talk about confessing humble inability to know everything and to do everything... and that suggests a confessional basis for success.

We easily absorb a similar teaching about success in God's kingdom from today's parable. The Pharisee's attempts towards success in God's world are sidelined because his heart is not humbled- he does not begin with a confessional basis. The perfection that the Pharisee attempts to maintain through his rituals of fasting and tithing do not exalt him to the successful status he desires. Instead, his attempts to exalt himself land him in judgmental territory where even in his prayers he comes off as holier than thou.

What we do see as successful in God's kingdom is the exemplary confession and repentance of the tax collector. He illustrates the posture we are to assume- a posture of humility. This takes on a physical posture. The tax collector averts his eyes from heaven- looking downward. He beats his breast as an ancient sign of repentance. These physical postures show an outward sign of an inward state- he knows he is a sinner and he comes before God confessing just that. The humbling of his heart is reflected in the humbling of his body, and this is the posture we are being taught to adopt by Jesus' parable, if we are to be successful in God's kingdom.

The confessional basis that anchors a humble heart is an important reformed principle. We begin our worship with confession to center our hearts in Christ's grace. In Tim Keller's book on Prayer he talks about our forefather John Calvin and his views on prayer, which give us guidelines for how we are to pray whenever we pray. Calvin has five rules for prayer- and they are listed in his Institutes on Christian religion. The second rule really hits on today's message, and Keller writes that: "Calvin warned against the common medieval (and modern) view that prayer was a way of putting on your best spiritual clothes, as it were, to impress God with your devoutness...In fact, those who would pray fruitfully must come with an attitude that is exactly the opposite. We must be ruthlessly honest about our flaws and weaknesses," and in summarizing Keller here, he continues to say that we must avoid putting on our best face before God. Instead, Keller says that "we should come to God knowing our only hope is in [Christ's] grace and forgiveness."

In all of Calvin's directions on prayer, there are nuggets of wisdom. I know I am relieved to hear his message. It is a relief to be reminded that God does not want me to show my own perfect righteousness, but that God wants me to acknowledge my imperfections before him. To be successful in God's kingdom, God wants me to be made more perfect in Christ, not in myself.

If this is what success looks like both in Harvard's estimation and in God's kingdom- then why is it so hard to adopt humility successfully? Aren't the formulas like Harvard's six suggestions and Calvin's five rules the equations that amount to success in this world and in God's world? If that were true then these formulaic equations wouldn't even be popular- they are there to encourage us in the face of the universally difficult challenge of humbling the heart- a process to which no one has the magic equation.

The heart is not humbled by formulaic action alone. This is the very heart of the parable's message- the Pharisee followed formulaic actions and missed the heart of the gospel lesson. So unfortunately- we can't just follow equations and make ourselves a success. Rather, we have to get our hearts in the right position, and that does not come from any formula for success, but it comes from confession.

Now- we might want to look at the tax collector as the exemplar because he confesses his sins. And it is tempting to read this parable as a portrayal of how to emulate right action by acting like the tax collector.

While that is tempting, the difficulty of this parable lies in that exact temptation. If you think that by emulating the tax collector's confession you have it right, then by default, others not emulating the tax collector are labeled as having it wrong. "The reformed folks who rely heavily on confession are right and those folks who rely heavily on reformed action are wrong!" This theology is right, and that theology is wrong... This is troublesome territory...didn't we initially establish the fact that the Pharisee was at fault for looking down on others?

We are both the Pharisee and the tax collector in the same breath. There is no dichotomy between the Pharisee and the tax collector. Rather there is a false dichotomy because there is no villain and there is no hero. There is only the common ground that both men in this story share and that all of us share. The common ground of sin.

Sin is a great equalizer that eats right through the false dichotomy of villain and hero. We are reminded by this parable that there is no villain and no hero in the eyes of God. We are all equals. This lectionary text is rather fitting given this political season. This is a polarizing time for our country, a time when it is tempting to label villains and heroes. So I think this is simply a good reminder from our sacred book to see whichever party you oppose with a little more grace, knowing that the common ground of sin is shared by all of God's creatures- whether they inhabit the political world, the business world, or even the church world.

This is the common ground which compels us to confess anyway. When we do so, we acknowledge that we are not perfect. We cannot obtain perfection through formulaic action like the Pharisee tried to do.

We can't follow rules and exalt ourselves before God- but we can acknowledge God's perfection, exalting God in God's proper place. When we do that we put ourselves in the humble position where we belong before our Creator.

Thankfully, as the tax collector reminds us, we all belong in this humble position together. We can't harness humility and exalt ourselves as great leaders in so doing...that might work in the business world according to Harvard's review, but not so much for God's kingdom. Rather we are called to humble ourselves as equals in God's kingdom. We get our hearts in the right place by confessing our sins and by believing that our sins equalize us all. As the church we are imperfect, but we try to get our hearts in the right place. We try, and thankfully we all get to try this out together...working towards humbling our hearts together in Christ as a covenant people. If I'm lucky, you all will welcome me in your midst, to serve alongside you, to join you in that ever present effort of humbling our hearts before God.

Amen.

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