

## *Crisis and Prophecy*

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

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Texts: Joel 2.23-32;  
Psalm 65;  
2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18;  
Luke 18.9-14

In the movie *Luther*, Joseph Fiennes plays a young Martin Luther at the beginning of what we have come to know as the Reformation. Early in the film there is a powerful scene. Luther is holed up in his room late at night tormented by his sense of failure and sin. He doesn't believe himself worthy to become a priest. His mentor and confessor, seeing his agony, invites him to turn to Christ with the prayer: "I am yours, save me!" In Luke's gospel today, Jesus holds up a similar figure. This tax collector, unable even to look up toward heaven, prays a very similar prayer to the one of Martin Luther: Lord be merciful to me, a sinner!

Jesus holds up this posture of prayer as the ideal for his disciples. He sets the tax collector's prayer of confession in contrast to the Pharisees' prayer of self-righteousness. Seems simple enough: Jesus even tells us at the beginning exactly how we are to interpret the parable he is about to tell. But I want to spend some time today thinking about precisely what it is about self-righteousness that Jesus wants to condemn and precisely what it is about remorse, guilt, and confession Jesus wants to uphold.

If you go back to watch that early scene closely in the movie, *Luther*, you immediately notice that his sense of guilt has fallen over the edge into something else...into shame. Luther is in agony over his sin. His confessor says to him at one point (I doubt this is at all historically accurate but it is very theologically significant), "Martin, in all the time I've known you've never confessed anything remotely interesting." He challenges Luther to see that his sense of guilt is no longer connected to things he has done wrong that he wants to change...it's a much more pervasive sense of

shame...a kind of self-hatred. And self-hatred and shame are not the same thing as guilt and remorse. Guilt is about regret for something you have done that you wish you could undo. Shame goes far deeper. It is a sense of being fundamentally broken at the core and completely unworthy as a human being.<sup>1</sup>

Shame is debilitating. It paralyzes. Shame is a prized tool in the arsenal of abusers for precisely this reason. It is how bullies maintain power; it is how abusers paralyze their victims. This is NOT the posture that Jesus is lifting up in our passage for today. When Martin Luther was caught up in shame he was stuck. He was useless as a priest. He could not see beyond himself and his obsession really with his failure. When we talk about a posture of prayer that begins with confession and remorse we are NOT talking about that kind of shame. Jesus is after something very different than that when he holds up the tax collector as the model for prayer.

I've mentioned before as we've been moving our way through Luke this year that a book by Paul Borgman called *The Way according to Luke* has been very helpful to me in seeing the way that Luke has put together this gospel story.<sup>2</sup> The thesis of this book is that the core teaching of Jesus in the gospel of Luke is organized in a chiasmic structure. What that means is that each theme builds on the one before until you get to the bulls eye – the central message of the gospel. Then the themes repeat in reverse order. As each theme is revisited, the teaching is amplified and expanded in significant ways. The companion teaching to the passage today was in Luke 11 which we read back on July 25<sup>th</sup>. It was the passage in which the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. They were given what we call the Lord's Prayer and then told "ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." Do you remember that passage? It ends with the promise that what God gives to us in prayer when we come seeking is the Holy Spirit. That's the purpose of prayer: to unite us with the Spirit of God.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm aware that the concept of total depravity seems to suggest precisely this kind of definition. But I would maintain that Calvin's articulation of total depravity is about the breadth and scope of sin and not meant to describe self-hatred or what we mean psychologically by shame.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Borgman, *Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eedmans Publishing Company, 2006).

If the first passage invites us to come to God in prayer expecting the generous outpouring of God's Spirit, then this second passage addresses those who unlike Martin Luther have not quite grasped their profound need to seek after the mercy of God. It is addressed to us who trust in ourselves and in our own righteousness and regard others with contempt. As Jesus does in so many of his parables, the characters are drawn in rather stark and obvious ways. Few of us want to see ourselves in the self-righteous prayer of this Pharisee. Most of us are more sophisticated in our subtlety. But a number of us in the Wednesday night small group have been reflecting on how hard it is for us to be willing to look at and acknowledge the parts of ourselves that are broken and need to change. Every week there is at least one meditation that invites us to explore the shadow side of ourselves and enter into that territory of confession. It's amazing how easy it is to scoot right on past that day's meditation. Some of us are as skilled at justifying our failures and mistakes as Martin Luther was skilled at obsessing over his.

Clearly when Jesus commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves he assumes that we do love ourselves - that we appreciate our unique gifts - that we acknowledge our strengths. But it is very easy to cross the line into self-satisfaction and to become so impressed with ourselves and our accomplishments that we no longer see ourselves as standing in need of God's mercy. It's a fine line between appreciating who we are before God as beloved, gifted, and created in the divine image, and falling over that line into self-righteousness. It's a fine line between acknowledging our profound need for God's mercy and falling over that line into shame. What's at stake in learning how to live inside each of these fine lines is the capacity to hear the Word of God as Gordon so eloquently described it last week: to listen for the Living Word of Jesus Christ breathing life into us. We aren't listening when we are filled with a sense of our own righteousness and we aren't listening when we are overcome with shame either.

What Jesus is lifting up in our passage today is the incredible power in that moment when we acknowledge with the tax collector that something is not right - that something is broken - that WE are broken and that we stand in

need of God's mercy. The trick is to let that moment of confession trigger not a spiraling descent into shame but to trigger instead an opening for us to hear what new Word God has to speak that can lead us away from what was broken and toward some source of new life. When Martin Luther got through his paralyzing sense of shame and finally went back to Scripture to hear what God had to say about his sin, he found himself in the book of Romans and Paul's discussion of grace. It set him free. It set him on fire in a way that transformed not only his own soul but the whole church of Jesus Christ. The protestant reformation that began from his questions not only created a new tradition in the church that is our own heritage, the Roman Catholic Church of which he was a part went through a counter reformation as a result.

There is something about crisis that opens us up to prophecy in the biblical sense of that word. Prophets are the ones who speak the Word of God in a way that opens our minds to see what is happening in the world around us and puts us on the path that God has set for us. After times of suffering - at moments of intense crisis, we often find ourselves open to hear a Word from God. Prophets grow from the fertile ground of struggle and oppression more than they do out of seasons of stability and security. Look at the biblical pattern. It was after the Assyrians moved in on the Northern tribes of Israel that the words of Isaiah and Amos came forth. It was after the Babylonians were heading toward the city of Jerusalem that Jeremiah and Ezekiel found their voice. It was after a season of devastating natural disaster that Joel issued his prophecy that we read today. Throughout church history and throughout our history this cycle continued. Mahatma Gandhi rose up out of the religious and class struggles of India. It was out of the hotbed of racial conflict in the American south that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke and as a result the racial injustice that had long required our attention finally became a national priority. I think we're seeing it again right now as we keep hearing about suicides among gay youth and other children who have been the targets of bullies. There's a movement now of Clergy United against Bullying. I just saw that a book by Jim Wallis of Sojourners is coming out to address this rising concern. This has been going on for a long time but the will to do something about it only seems to come after something tragic.

This pattern of crisis and then prophecy has to do with the dynamics Jesus is addressing in this parable today. When we feel satisfied with our own holiness and rehearse all the good deeds we have done - when we are on that high horse of self-righteousness - we are not listening for the ways that God would have us change. When we are consumed by shame, we aren't listening either. But when your heart is open and you have no pretenses of being perfect, that's when God can speak to you and show you where your mistakes lie...not so you will feel awful but so that you can do something about it. This passage invites us to listen really closely during seasons of crisis and times of struggle and moments of confession. And it invites us during seasons of stability to be even more vigilant in keeping our ears open - to guard against letting comfort lead us into self-satisfaction where we lose track of just how profoundly we need the mercy of God. The credo of the reformation is "to be reformed and ALWAYS reforming according to the Word of God." We are never done. Until our union with God is complete...the prayer of the tax collector needs to be our prayer.

Amen.