

**TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 25C**

Joel 2:23-32

Psalm 65

2 Timothy 4:5-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

**OCTOBER 24, 2010**

St. Matthew's Church

Chesterfield, VA

Ruth Partlow

ONCE AGAIN JESUS IS INSTRUCTING PEOPLE ON PRAYER. LAST SUNDAY THE PRIMARY THEME WAS PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER, WITH AN IMPORTANT SUBTEXT OF FAITH – TRUST IN GOD. THE PASSAGE ENDED WITH THE QUESTION: “WOULD THE SON OF MAN FIND FAITH ON EARTH WHEN HE RETURNED?” (Luke 18:8) FAITH IS AN ATTITUDE, A CONFIDENCE, A TRUST – THAT IN ALL THINGS, GOD HAS EVERYTHING WELL IN HAND. IT’S A DECISION TO TRUST IN GOD EVEN WHEN THE WORLD AROUND US SEEMS TO BE FALLING APART. NOW, IN TODAY’S GOSPEL JESUS CHALLENGES US TO CONSIDER – HOW WE PRAY. AS HE TELLS THE PARABLE HE IS ADDRESSING A GROUP OF THOSE WHO PUT THEIR FAITH IN THEMSELVES RATHER THAN IN GOD.

JESUS BEGAN WITH: “TWO MEN GO UP TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY”. DO YOU SENSE THE UPWARD MOVEMENT? TWO MEN GO UP TO PRAY. SO OFTEN WE RECOGNIZE GOD’S GREATNESS AND OTHERNESS BY LOOKING UP –SEEING GOD AS SOMETHING LARGER THAN OURSELVES, GREATER THAN WE CAN IMAGINE. GOD IS OTHER, NOT US. GOING UP TO PRAY HIGHLIGHTS GOD’S VASTNESS AND THE LITTLENESS OF THE TWO MEN.

FROM AN EARLY AGE WE THINK OF GOD AS BEING “UP”. CHILDREN TEND TO PERCEIVE GOD AS THAT OLD MAN IN THE SKY – PERHAPS SITTING ON A CLOUD OR ON A THRONE IN THE MIDST OF THE CLOUDS. IN MANY PLACES SCRIPTURE GIVES US A SENSE OF GOD’S OTHERNESS THROUGH ELEVATION AND HEIGHT.

IT WAS UP ON MT. SINAI THAT MOSES ENCOUNTERED GOD AND RECEIVED THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. (Exodus 19-20)

ELIJAH HID IN THE ROCK HIGH UP ON MT SINAI AS GOD PASSED BY IN THE SOUND OF SHEER SILENCE; (1 Kings 19:12)

ISAIAH SAW THE “LORD IN A VISION HIGH AND LIFTED UP AND HIS TRAIN FILLED THE TEMPLE; (Isaiah 6:1)

PETER, JAMES AND JOHN WITNESSED JESUS TALKING WITH MOSES AND ELIJAH ON THE MT. OF TRANSFIGURATION. THEY HEARD GOD SPEAK FROM THE CLOUD, “THIS IS MY SON, MY CHOSEN ONE. LISTEN TO HIM”. (Luke 9:28-36).

GOING UP TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY, TO BE IN GOD’S PRESENCE IS A PART OF ANCIENT JEWISH WORSHIP. TODAY AND THROUGH THE AGES CHURCHES AND CATHEDRALS ARE BUILT WITH HIGH, VAULTED CEILINGS. SPIRES ARE ADDED ALL TO GIVE THE SENSE OF REACHING UP TO GOD – GOD WHO IS ABOVE – OTHER. THE CROSS AT THE ALTAR IS ABOVE IS, IN MOST PLACES, ELEVATED TO SOME DEGREE ABOVE THE WORSHIPERS HEADS.

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER BEGINS WITH “LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS” IN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE “UPWARD-NESS” OF GOD, A RECOGNITION OF THE OTHERNESS AND GREATNESS OF GOD. IN LOOKING UPWARD WE ACKNOWLEDGE GOD’S OTHERNESS, GOD’S GREATNESS. THIS IS THE FIRST LESSON OF THE PARABLE.

THE SECOND LESSON IS ONE OF JESUS’ GREAT REVERSALS. IF YOU REMEMBER HIS LISTENERS WERE DESCRIBED AS BEING FILLED WITH PRIDE, TRUSTING ONLY IN THEMSELVES. AS JESUS CONTINUES THE PARABLE HE NOTES THAT TWO MEN IN THE PARABLE WERE VERY DIFFERENT. ONE WAS A PHARISEE – PIOUS, HOLY, –A THE PILLAR OF SOCIETY. NOT UNLIKE THOSE LISTENING TO JESUS. TODAY WE MIGHT SEE THE MAN AS A BISHOP OR A WELL KNOWN PRIEST CLOTHED IN BEAUTIFUL EUCHARISTIC VESTMENTS, STANDING FRONT AND CENTER BEFORE THE ALTAR, PRAYER BOOK OR BIBLE IN HAND.

THE OTHER MAN WAS A DESPISED TAX COLLECTOR– AT THE BOTTOM OF SOCIAL LADDER. HE WAS A TAX COLLECTOR KNOWN FOR COLLUDING WITH THE ROMANS AND ROBBING HIS OWN PEOPLE THE JEWS TO MAKE HIMSELF RICH. TODAY

WE MIGHT SEE HIM AS A SCOUNDREL LIKE BERNIE MADOFF – WHO STOLE MILLIONS FROM OTHERS – EVEN HIS OWN JEWISH BROTHERS AND SISTERS – TO LINE HIS OWN POCKETS WITH GOLD.

BOTH MEN HAD COME TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY. WOULDN'T YOU EXPECT THAT THE PHARISEE – THE PILLAR OF SOCIETY WOULD LEAVE THE TEMPLE, BLESSED BY GOD, HAVING BEEN FOUND RIGHTEOUS IN GOD'S SIGHT? HE PRACTICED HIS FAITH DILIGENTLY IN EVERY WAY. HE EVEN EXCEEDED THE REQUIREMENTS FOR FASTING; HE EXCELLED IN GIVING – MUCH MORE THAN REQUIRED. YET, WHEN HE LEFT THE TEMPLE JESUS TELLS US HE WAS NOT JUSTIFIED – NOT MADE RIGHT IN GOD'S EYES. INSTEAD, IT WAS THE TAX COLLECTOR, THE SCOUNDREL, WHO WAS JUSTIFIED – MADE RIGHT WITH GOD. WHAT A SHOCK TO THOSE LISTENING – THOSE WELL HEELED, CRITICAL, SELF-RIGHTEOUS FOLKS! JESUS CERTAINLY TURNED THE TABLES ON THEM -- MOST LIKELY AN IRRITATING SURPRISE!

IT'S A REVERSAL OF WHAT WE EXPECT. JESUS IS ALWAYS PUSHING THE MARGINS – SHOCKING THE UPRIGHT AND WELCOMING THE SINNER. PERHAPS THE MESSAGE IS: “DON'T COUNT ON YOUR ACTIONS AND PIOUS PRACTICES TO GET YOU INTO GOD'S GOOD GRACES”. IT'S A REMINDER THAT GOD LOOKS NOT ON EXTERNAL ACTIONS AND PRACTICES BUT ON THE HEART. THE TAX COLLECTOR KNEW HE WAS UNWORTHY, A SINNER. HE WAS NOT WELCOME IN THAT HOLY PLACE. TO APPROACH THE ALTAR WOULD HAVE BEEN OFFENSE TO ALL PRESENT. HE PRAYED IN FEAR AND TREMBLING AT THE REAR OF THAT HOLY SPACE.

I CAN'T HELP BUT THINK OF TODAY'S BOOK GROUP SELECTION FROM THE SANCTUARY TO THE STREETS. I WONDER IF SOME OF RICHMOND'S STREET PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE THE SAME REACTION – FEELING NOT WELCOME AND COWERING IN THE REAR OF SUCH A HOLY SPACE – EVEN RIGHT HERE AT ST. MATTHEWS..

THE TAX COLLECTOR PRAYED RECOGNIZING HIS OWN SINFULNESS AND THE NEED FOR GOD'S MERCY WHILE THE PHARISEE THANKED GOD FOR HIS MANY BLESSINGS. INSTEAD OF A HUMBLE ATTITUDE OR AN AWARENESS OF HIS OWN SINS THE PHARISEE OOZED PRIDE AS HE ENUMERATING HIS OWN ATTRIBUTES AND TO IMPRESS GOD BY PUTTING DOWN THOSE WHO DIFFERED FROM HIM.

THE SECOND LESSON IS THAT WE'RE CALLED TO APPROACH GOD WITH HUMILITY, PUTTING AWAY PRIDE AND RECOGNIZE THAT WE ALL ARE SINNERS, UNWORTHY BEFORE GOD. NONE OF US IS BETTER THAN THE NEXT PERSON. IT IS ONLY THROUGH GOD'S LOVING GRACE AND MERCY THAT WE ARE ACCEPTED.

THE LAST LESSON IS ONE WE MIGHT MISS. IT'S VERY SUBTLE, ALMOST HIDDEN. IT IS THAT PRAYER IS NOT ALWAYS UPWARD, BUT SOMETIMES IT IS INWARD. THE TAX COLLECTOR PRAYED A FORM OF THE PRAYER THAT HAS BECOME KNOWN AS THE "JESUS PRAYER," – "GOD HAVE MERCY ON ME A SINNER." (IN THE JESUS PRAYER "JESUS" IS USED IN PLACE OF GOD.) THROUGH THIS PRAYER THE TAX COLLECTOR QUIETED HIMSELF AND WAITED ON THE LORD WITH THE WORDS, "GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME A SINNER". WHEN HIS PRAYER WAS FINISHED HE WENT DOWN TO HIS HOUSE RENEWED AND FILLED WITH GOD'S GRACE.

IN CONTRAST THE PHARISEE'S PRAYER WAS ONE STREAM OF ORATION. HE GAVE THANKS TO GOD IN A STEADY STREAM OF WORDS DESCRIBING HIS MANY PIOUS ACTIONS AND ATTRIBUTES THAT MADE HIM SUPERIOR TO EVERYONE ELSE.. THERE WAS NO SILENCE OR LISTENING TO GOD DEEP WITHIN.

THE JESUS PRAYER IS AN EXAMPLE OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER THAT RECOGNIZES GOD DEEP WITHIN. IT'S A FORM OF PRAYER THAT REQUIRES ONLY THAT WE BE STILL, QUIETING THE INNER CHATTER OF OUR MINDS. TO COME TO THAT STILLNESS ONE SILENTLY REPEATS A CHOSEN WORD OR PHRASE – IN THIS CASE "GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME A SINNER". IT IS REPEATED SILENTLY TO ASSIST IN

QUIETING THE BUSY-NESS OF OUR MINDS SO THAT WE MIGHT TO ENTER THAT DEEP INNER PLACE WITHIN WHERE GOD IS IN ALL GOD'S SPACIOUSNESS. WHENEVER DISTRACTED BY INTERNAL CHATTER, ONE RETURNS TO THE PRAYER WORD.

SILENCE LEADS US INTO GOD'S PRESENCE. ELIJAH ENCOUNTERED GOD IN THE SOUND OF SHEER SILENCE ON MT. SINAI. JESUS OFTEN WENT OFF TO PRAY BY HIMSELF. CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER AND LISTENING FOR GOD WITHIN IS A DISCIPLINE. IT'S NOT EASY TO QUIET THE CHATTER IN OUR HEADS, BUT IT'S WORTH PRACTICING AND MAKING THE EFFORT. I TRY, I STRUGGLE, I FAIL; AND THEN I TRY AGAIN.

THIS SERMON REALLY GREW OUT OF WEDNESDAY'S NOON EUCHARIST. WHERE WE HAVE BEGUN SPENDING A FEW MINUTES IN REFLECTIVE STUDY OF THE GOSPEL FOR THE NEXT SUNDAY. WE USE A FORM KNOWN AS THE AFRICAN METHOD, DEVELOPED OUT OF NECESSITY IN THE BASE COMMUNITIES OF SOUTH AMERICA WHERE OFTEN THERE WAS ONLY ONE BIBLE PER GATHERED COMMUNITY.

THIS WEEK, BARBARA AND DOC FISCHER, BOB AND I TALKED ABOUT THIS PARABLE SHARING OUR PERCEPTIONS OF ITS MEANING. BARBARA NOTED THE UPWARD MOVEMENT TOWARD GOD AND THE DOWNWARD MOVEMENT INTO THE WORLD. BOB SAW THE JESUS PRAYER IN THE WORDS OF THE TAX COLLECTOR. WE TALKED OF THE WORKSHOP ON CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER WHICH THE FOUR OF US HAD ATTENDED A WEEK AGO AT ST. STEPHEN'S. FR. MARTIN LAIRD LED IT. HE'S A ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST AND PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES AT VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY. OUR CONVERSATION IS AN EXAMPLE HOW WE LEARN AND UNDERSTAND SCRIPTURE IN THE MIDST OF COMMUNITY. OUR CONVERSATION WEDNESDAY CERTAINLY SHAPED THIS SERMON.

TO RECAP JESUS' MESSAGE TO US TODAY IN THIS PARABLE OF THE TAX COLLECTOR AND THE PHARISEE, THERE ARE THREE LESSONS:

- WE'RE TO HAVE AN AWARENESS OF GOD'S GREATNESS AND OTHERNESS, SYMBOLIZED BY THE MEN GOING UP TO PRAY – "UPWARD-NESS"
- WE'RE TO BE WILLING, LIKE THE TAX COLLECTOR, TO HUMBLE OURSELVES BEFORE GOD, RECOGNIZING OUR OWN INADEQUACIES AND SINS
- AND FINALLY, TO LEARN ANOTHER WAY OF PRAYER – ONE THAT RECOGNIZES GOD AS "GOD WITHIN" – THAT IS "GOD WITH US", – "EMMANUEL".

IT'S MY HOPE THAT MAY THESE THREE LESSONS ON HOW WE PRAY MAY ENLIVEN OUR OWN LIFE IN CHRIST – THAT OUR LIFE OF PRAYER MAY ENRICHED AND DEEPENED.