

Sermon for 23 October 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Joel 2:23-32; Psalter: UMH789 (Psalm 65); 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

"Confession"

Confession.

The word puts us on the defensive.

The parable does that, too. Whether Jesus told it this way or not, we have it in Luke's words this way. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt"...

I haven't gotten very far with anybody that way. Have you? "The rest of us put our trash in cans with lids. Why can't you?" Have you said that to your messy neighbor lately? Have you successfully talked like that to your kith and kin?

What's holy about this word? How is it useful to those of us who believe in a good God and try to help make the world a better place?

When you look at where we are in the scripture readings this time of year, you find a lot of emphasis on the prophets and their efforts to teach the Jews about trouble, and about character, and ambition, and today we even get into the question of death in Paul's second letter to the young church leader, Timothy.

How do you inspire people to behave well? How do you talk to someone who's really in bad shape? Someone already behind bars, or someone with stage four cancer?

"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!'"

How does that give the criminal any hope? Or the person gravely ill?

The passage from Joel for today stops preaching prophetic judgment to the people of Israel, and talks about renewal, like Joseph whose brothers packed him off into slavery because he was so spoiled and conceited with their old daddy. He ended up rescuing them all from Egyptian slavery. The Apostle Paul, reflecting about coming to the end of his long career preaching Christ, is not just realistic about the little time before he stops breathing. He's pretty optimistic: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever."

And the psalm for today looks all around and sees, not the glass half empty, as we tend to do these days, God help us. That writer ends with us singing, "The river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it."

Thank God my atheist son agrees with me that you're better off if you count on things turning out better rather than worse, and if you treat people, including yourself, like they're pretty decent in general.

It just doesn't pay to harass folks, or to give up, or let up on decency and kindness.

What's wrong with the guy that thinks he's OK? The only thing I can come up with is that he scorns others.

If that hits home, work on it. That's early-stage human. I even remember that in myself. And there you go ... I've still got something to work on

In fact, if we want to get anywhere together, that's the direction to head. That's what I get out of Jesus' parable. It's something to work on. None of us can ignore it. That's why the Roman Catholics make it an obligation. You can treat it lightly if you want ... but doing without confession in your prayer life is pretty much like skating on thin ice, all along the way.

Let us pray.

Lord, as you know, I told the District Superintendent last Monday about our problem being six months behind in paying our apportionments. I told her what worried me was that we haven't even talked about it with each other, much less paid up like we usually do. She talked to the chancellor of the Annual Conference, who said that, if she agreed to it, and I agreed to it, we could borrow the money that came from our sale of the parsonage 20 years ago, and pay ourselves back what we spent on the new roof a couple of years ago, use some of it to bring us up to date on our apportionments, and THEN work on our general finances and what we want to do next in ministry, seeing as we've had this fall-back from our usual up-to-date approach to expenses. You know I've prayed about this, and that I think it's a good idea. So does the D.S. I think it's an answer to the prayer we heard Jesus preaching last week in the parable about the unrighteous judge and the persistent widow who insisted on getting justice until she wore him out and he granted her request. Jesus said faithful folks get results from persistency in their praying. Help us pray about this as though it's an answer to our current situation, and come to a sound conclusion real soon. In Jesus' name, Amen.