

Reserved
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
October 27, 2013

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

6 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.

16 At 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

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. ¹¹The 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. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” ¹³But 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!” ¹⁴I 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.’

We consider today Reformation Sunday. See, it's even on the front of our bulletins. You may remember from your history classes that the Reformation was started when Martin Luther tacked his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg. Studies have since proven this movie-worthy, dramatic scene is likely not how Martin Luther made known his grievances; more likely, and much less dramatically, “Luther wrote a letter to his superiors on October 31, 1517 in which he denounced the sale of indulgence and asked for repayment and removal of the misunderstandings.”¹ This letter included his Ninety-Five Theses. Fortunately, how they came about is of far less interest to us than **that** they came about.

If you sit down and read the Ninety-Five Theses, and you can find them easily on the Internet, you'll find that Luther, who was a faithful monk, believed strongly in the good of the Pope and his good intentions. His early argument was with the priests who convinced people that they could buy those they loved out of purgatory and into heaven. He objected to the deception of trusting believers who were convinced by greedy priests that their money was best spent in this way, that this was the right thing to do if they really loved those who had died. He especially objected to the idea that an individual

¹ <http://www.luther.de/en/legenden/tanschl.html>

could buy absolution for sins with money, when Christ had paid for our forgiveness with his life. That anyone could think themselves worthy because of their own deeds or of their own accord was, and is, antithetical to the gospel.

We read in Luke “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.’” And what does Jesus say of this man, who was self-assured in his following of the Law? The tax collector went down to his home justified, not the Pharisee. Luther’s thirty-second thesis states: “Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.”

We might think that Paul, in our reading from 2 Timothy, is indulging in a bit of his own self-righteousness when he writes, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Paul continues, though, writing that the Lord has reserved the crown of righteousness for him, the Lord stood by him and gave him strength, the Lord will rescue him. What he has in common with the tax collector, who stood far off and who “would not even look up to heaven” and who was “beating his breast saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” was a humility before God. Pastor Laura Sugg lists among the differences between Paul and the Pharisee that “The Pharisee stood in the comfort of God’s temple; Paul writes from prison. The Pharisee heaps scorn on others he deems less righteous than himself; Paul affirms that the crown belongs ‘not only to [himself] but also to all who have longed for [the Lord’s] appearing.’”²

As with so much of the gospel, and the Bible as a whole, these readings help direct us to getting our priorities right, right with God, directed toward righteousness through God. Luther offered a similar directive in his forty-fifth thesis: “Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God’s wrath.” Jesus says, “all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Professor Marjorie Procter-Smith is keenly aware that, as she says, “Surely this is one of the greatest spiritual paradoxes. ‘Be humble!’ As soon as we have arrived at a suitable state of humility we are tempted to take pride in our accomplishment.”³

Tied to humility is righteousness, one of those tricky concepts for us to face. The words of Professor Mary Schertz might help offer some clarity. She says, in speaking of Paul and the crown of righteousness, “He imagines that the Lord of justice will crown him and all those who love and look for the appearance of the Lord with justice. The words that we usually translate as righteousness

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 216.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 215.

(*dikaiosyne*) and righteous (*dikaios*) can also be translated as ‘justice’ and ‘just.’ ...In this passage, where the situation in which Paul finds himself is so blatantly unjust, ‘justice’ and ‘just’ are likely the better translation. Martyrdom, the highest human acquiescence to injustice for God’s sake, becomes doable only in the context of a steady belief that God is the ultimate arbiter of justice.”⁴ Professor E. Elizabeth Johnson brings it back to the example of the Pharisee explaining, “Those who are contemptuous of others have come to consider justice a characteristic of themselves, rather than a characteristic that rightly belongs only to God.”⁵

From whom was the Pharisee seeking judgment? Himself. What about the tax collector and Paul? From God alone. And only God could reserve the “crown of righteousness” for Paul. Paul does not say “the crown of righteousness is reserved **by** me” but “for me” and the one who will give it to him is the same one who reserves it. So what does this all mean for us? There will always be occasions when we recognize that we have thanked God that we are not like “them.” Should we spend our days “beating our breast”? That’s not where Jesus’ story ended. He finished by saying the tax collector went down to his home. Sugg points out “the humility of the tax collector does not require wallowing in self-loathing.”⁶ The point of the parable is not to induce self-loathing in us but self-awareness, to shake us from our self-righteousness and self-promotion, if you will. If we are so caught up in convincing ourselves how much we are getting right, and let me be clear - recognizing that we are getting things right is a **good** thing, if we are caught up in patting ourselves on the back, “if we say we have no sin,” as we read in 1 John, “we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”⁷ If we are so full of ourselves, and contentedly so, then how can there be enough room for Christ?

Luther concluded his Ninety-Five Theses with these two: “94. Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death, and hell. 95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace.” As we think back to the beginning of the reformations with these words of Luther’s, let us remember that, as the Presbyterian Church, we are the church reformed, always being reformed. And as individual members, through Christ, we, too, are re-formed and we are called to continue being re-formed ourselves until we, like Paul, can say at the end of our days, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Let us pray: God, be merciful to us, sinners all. Amen.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 208.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 213.

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 216.

⁷ 1 John 1:8