

Pollocksville Presbyterian Church

October 23, 2022

Micah 6:6-8

Luke 18: 9-14

Arrogance and Humility

Well, we are right smack in the middle of the season of “self-promotion” in the electoral process. Pretty much gone are the candidate “image building” advertisements on TV that we saw in the early spring of the year. Now it seems every commercial break is flooded opponent attack ads, showing the most unflattering pictures available, and warning of catastrophe if “so and so” is elected. Maybe you share my distaste for this aspect of our politics. It is the season of “self-promotion” for sure, only it has gotten even more bitter as America’s partisan divide has become more pronounced.

It almost makes you long for one more Medicare Advantage ad or even a car dealer or furniture store ad that blares out at the viewer at top volume! Almost...

In more thoughtful moments, I am sure you have asked with me, “Is this really the best way to choose our leaders?” Or maybe you have questioned, “How many good, capable, leaders refuse to run for office because they do not wish to subject themselves or their families to this negative advertising.”

November 8th is Election Day, so soon this acrimony may subside, at least a little. For Christians, of whatever political persuasion, our deepest concern must remain the promises of the Gospel and the call of servanthood to Christ on our lives. We are called to bring and support compassionate solutions.

Well, fortunately our lesson today is not about politics. It is a lesson on how we regard ourselves, particularly in relationship with our God. As we read in the Old Testament book of Micah, this is not a new issue. Indeed, it is the central issue that even Adam and Eve struggled with in the Genesis account.

How do we regard ourselves in relationship with our God? How is our relationship with our Creator defined and described?

The Prophet, Micah was from a small town named Moresheth Gath, less than 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. It is a dry, rugged land, hilly, more favorable to herding than to cultivation. We don't know much about Micah's life, but clearly something in his environment or understanding made him more attuned to God's voice. Throughout the Scriptures we often see God choose unlikely spokespeople to follow his will. Micah, was one of these unlikely but effective servants.

The grand Kingdoms of David and Solomon are dated around 1000 BCE. Micah prophesized a little later, perhaps around 750 BCE. (Remember in BCE times we count downward.) The weak leadership and unfaithful practices of Israel and Judah were the targets of Micah's prophecy. Like his contemporary Jeremiah, Micah's message alternated between God's coming punishment and his promises of redemption. Both proved to be correct. The great powers of the day were Assyria, Egypt, and later Babylon. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and Judah, including Jerusalem ultimately were conquered by these more powerful neighbors. Micah's timely message was that internal moral decay paved the way for these conquests.

Probably no verse within the Book of Micah is quoted more frequently than Micah 6:8 – “*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*”

It is a clear and concise statement on how the life priorities of a person of faith should be structured. To pursue these three objectives, Justice, Mercy, and Humility is enough to consume a lifetime. And they are presented as the formula for what “pleases God.” It is the Prophet’s clear answer to our earlier question:

How do we regard ourselves in relationship with our God? How is our relationship with our Creator defined and described?

Turning now to our New Testament Lectionary lesson for today, we are presented with the *Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector*, found only in Luke’s Gospel.

Luke points out that Jesus presented this account to those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else,” which in any given moment might include any of us...but likely was directed at the Jewish leaders at the time it was spoken.

Well, “self-promotion” and “self-righteousness” are closely aligned. In every age, and in every life, we humans are subject to having an outsized view of ourselves. In this parable Jesus is purposely contrasting “self-righteousness” with “humility.”

In the language of the faith, the opposite of “self-righteous” is “humility” or to be “humble.” And in this parable Jesus is painting a picture of the differences between the two. The Pharisee is the example of self-righteousness, while the tax collector was an example of humility. Particularly, Jesus is describing a truthful relationship with God in the prayers of these two men.

Now we know in the culture in which Jesus spoke, the Pharisees were the most admired of men. They controlled the wealth and the power in the nation of Israel. True, the Romans were the occupying force, but the Pharisees lived in the best houses, wore the finest clothes, and even set the standards upon which the behavior and character of men and women were judged. In other places, Jesus spoke how the Pharisees always received the place of honor at the banquet, and people cleared the way when they walked in the marketplace. The Pharisees were on the top rung of the social ladder!

We also remember that the tax collector was the most despised of people in the Jewish culture. The tax collector’s responsibility was to collect revenue for the Roman occupiers. So, much of the hatred of Rome was directed at the tax collectors. They were considered traitors and outcasts. “He eats with tax collectors!” was a frequent charge leveled against Jesus. The tax collectors were on the bottom rung of the social ladder of the day.

So, our two men in Jesus' parable are very different. And their prayers are very different. The Pharisee spent his prayer time telling God what a good guy he was, and enumerating for God the good things he had done. The good things were obedient actions, but here, by the Pharisee's own words, the good deeds were not done for God's glory, but for his own glory. The actions were right, but the attitude was wrong.

On the other hand, the tax collector was so ashamed of the things that he had done that he would not even lift his eyes to heaven. We don't know whom he may have pressured or cheated, but his behavior indicates that he had practiced some greed and dishonesty. He referred to himself as a "sinner." He was remorseful and in anguish and he pleaded for God's mercy as he acknowledged his sin. His actions were wrong, but his attitude was right.

Or as Jesus said, referring to the tax collector, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."

John Calvin, the theologian most often associated with Reformed Christianity and Presbyterianism introduced the concept of “total depravity.” While volumes have been written on this topic, essentially it says that because of humankind’s fall from grace, we are inextricably mired in sin. Even our best actions are tainted by an undercurrent of greed, self-promotion, and sin. “Total depravity” is not a happy thought or concept, and it firmly slams the door on the thinking that we can somehow work our way into salvation or back into a right relationship with God. Apart from the grace and mercy of God, there is no action we can execute that is completely done selflessly and only for God’s glory.

We help someone in the name of Christ, and we can’t wait to tell about it and to receive the acclaim. If we donate to a cause, we get miffed if we don’t receive a gracious enough thank-you. We claim to be making sacrifices in the name of Christ, but then we emotionally attach strings to be sure the money is being spent according to our own approval. “Total depravity” says it is impossible for us to get 100% away from this sort of behavior, outside of the Grace of God.

That Grace is provided by God, freely through Jesus Christ. We can do nothing to earn it. And we spend a lifetime being transformed by Christ into useful servants. So, before we take too hard a stance against the Pharisee’s behavior in our story, we do well to look in the mirror. We are subject to the same pitfalls as the Pharisee in the parable of Jesus.

But here is the point Jesus was making with this parable. God does honor the righteous prayer and the contrite heart. Through Jesus Christ, and for his Glory, God does lift us out of “total depravity” and He accepts the sacrifice of Christ as payment for our sin and shortcomings. It is called Grace and it is God’s own choice to extend it to us. As Paul writes many times, we can take no credit for it.

Not to earn that Grace, but because of it, we dedicate our words, our actions, and our lives to God’s Glory through servant hood in Christ Jesus.

Nearly 800 years before Luke documented this account, the Prophet Micah put it this way:

Micah 6:8 – “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Or as the old slave trader, John Newton once wrote:

Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see!

To God Be the Glory

AMEN