

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 23 October 2022
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 30

1st Reading: *Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22*

Psalm: *84:1-7*

2nd Reading: *II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18*

Gospel: *Luke 18:9-14*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In peace let us pray to the Lord: Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us.

And again before communion:

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us.

Have you ever noticed that “have mercy” is a recurring phrase in our liturgy?

The three examples above come from the Kyrie, the Gloria, and the Agnus Dei, which have been sung by Christians at communion for hundreds and hundreds of years.

But we also say “have mercy” in our prayers as well. In our confession of sins, we pray “For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us”. And during the intercessory prayers, we often pray “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer” or “Hear us, O God, your mercy is great”.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells us a parable about a Pharisee, who believes that he is a really good person, and a tax collector, who knows that he is not. Each goes into the temple to pray, and the Pharisee tells God just what a good person he is. But then Jesus tells us that “the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”. And Jesus says that it was “this man [who] went down to his house justified.”

Tax Collectors were notorious for cheating those from whom they collected the taxes, and this man knew he had been dishonest. His repentance was genuine, and he beat his breast. He would change his life and not sin again. And we, too, acknowledge that we have sinned and need God's mercy. We also need to be genuine in our repentance, leave our wrong actions behind, and trust in God's grace. Yet we also know that we are imperfect and continue to need God's mercy.

It is such a simple prayer: "Have mercy on me!"

And it is not only in this parable that we hear someone with this prayer on their lips. Remember the ten lepers who approached Jesus a few weeks ago with the plea, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"? And there are many other examples.

So it seems that this prayer for mercy may be the most basic of all Christian prayers, and one that God does indeed hear. It is a prayer in which we do not presume to tell God what to do, but simply present ourselves in humility, asking him to hear us, trusting that he knows best how to answer our pleas. Martin Luther, echoing Jesus when he said not to multiply words in our prayers, once said: "The fewer the words, the better the prayer". And so it is fitting that "have mercy on us" should be one of the most basic parts of our liturgy.

In the Eastern Orthodox church, the various forms of this prayer found in the Gospels have been put together in this way: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This is known as the "Jesus Prayer", which acknowledges Jesus as Lord and as God, then presents ourselves and our pleas to him, acknowledging our own sin, that we need help to overcome it, change our ways and live rightly, and asking for his mercy. It is said that this prayer contains the entire Gospel, God's grace and mercy freely given to us sinners when we repent.

I sometimes also use a different adaptation of the Jesus Prayer in my own prayers, saying "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, your servant" - and then also praying for others in the same way: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on your servant Willy; Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on your servants Sheridan and Marybeth"; and so on. It is a way of consciously naming each person before God, and asking for his mercy on them.

Praying is not always easy, and I think each of us struggles with how to phrase our prayers and exactly what we should pray for. The Jesus Prayer, or any simple prayer to God to have mercy can be one way that we can pray when "we do not know what to pray for as we ought", as Paul himself admits in his letter to the Romans. It isn't a magic formula. Prayer is never about magic formulas. But the simple prayer to "have mercy" can be a deep and meaningful way to present ourselves and our petitions to God.

Jesus tells us that God responded to the tax collector's simple prayer for mercy, and that "this man went down to his house justified." And we, too, can follow Jesus by trusting him and trusting that he will indeed have mercy on us.

And that's the end of Part 1 of my sermon this week. But now I want to shift gears a little bit in Part 2 and talk about this same parable in a slightly different way. This past week, on Tuesday, the 18th of October, we commemorated the feast of Saint Luke the Evangelist. We have been reading from Luke's Gospel this entire year, Year C in the lectionary, but we will soon be entering the next cycle, returning to Year A, when we concentrate on the Gospel of Matthew. And I would like to suggest that this parable is a critical one when we consider what Luke is trying to tell us in his Gospel.

And I've brought another book for Show and Tell this morning. This time it just happens to be my own book that I have written about the Gospel of Luke, titled Luke the Composer. Now, please don't get the wrong impression. I'm not trying to sell my book. It is very expensive, very boring, and rather technical, with lots of Greek. And it was really written for a small number of people who are interested in what is known as the "Synoptic Problem", which has to do with the specific relationships between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So, just to let you know, the basic idea that I present in this book is that Luke used both Matthew and Mark as direct sources for his Gospel. Actually, Luke himself kind of says so in the first few verses of his Gospel.

But Luke arranges his stories in his own unique way. He does start out very much like Matthew does, telling of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, his baptism by John, his temptation, and then gives a summary of Jesus' basic teachings in a rather shorter version of the Sermon on the Mount than Matthew's, and then we hear about the Transfiguration. But then Luke, unlike Matthew or Mark, launches into a very long sequence of stories and parables which we might call the "Journey to Jerusalem", where he shows us what it really means to follow Jesus, as Jesus himself prepares to be crucified in Jerusalem.

It is from this middle section of Luke that we have been reading ever since Trinity Sunday. This parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector comes right near the end of this journey and illustrates the sharp distinction Luke makes between those who choose their own way, like the Pharisee, and those who choose to turn away from their sin, their pride, or their mistakes, and instead turn to Jesus for mercy like the Tax Collector. So there are those who choose to reject Jesus, and those who choose to accept him.

In the next couple of stories in Luke's Gospel, this parable will be acted out dramatically in real life. First, the Rich Young Man comes before Jesus and recounts how good he is, having followed all the commandments. But when Jesus asks him to commit all of himself, he goes away dejected. He is unable to accept Jesus above his own wealth and accomplishments. And then we have the story of Zacchaeus, the Tax Collector, who is also rich, but when he meets Jesus, he acknowledges his sins and repents of them, giving away half of his wealth when he accepts Jesus.

And so when Jesus does reach Jerusalem in that same chapter, we see this scenario playing out again and again. Each person Jesus encounters from this point on is given the stark choice of rejecting or accepting Jesus, the best example being the two thieves being crucified with Jesus. Only in Luke's Gospel do we hear that one of them mocks Jesus, but the other confesses his own sins, repents, and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." So Luke is giving each one of us, as we read his Gospel, the choice of accepting or rejecting him.

So let us be like the Tax Collector in today's parable, accept that we, too, are sinners who need help and forgiveness, and call out in repentance: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

Amen!

Copyright © 2022 - Thomas J. Mosbø