

Sermon Title: The Undivided Life – incomparable humility

Text: Luke 18:9-14; Psalm 84:6

I am drawn to a simple uncomplicated prayer in the film and book Eat, Pray, Love.

Elizabeth Gilbert journals the first time she remembers praying. She was at the beginning of the painful process of separating from her partner. And she was in turmoil...

Her prayer went something like this:

“Hello, God. How are you? I’m Liz. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’ve always been a big fan of your work!”

“I’m sorry to bother you so late at night, but I’m in serious trouble. I am not an expert at praying, but can you help me? I don’t know what to do. Please tell me how to do”

The scene in the film breaks me open.

I love the honesty, the klunkiness of it all. And it reminds me that no matter how sophisticated I can be with my prayers, God always remains a mystery, unknown to me.

Jesus tells a story...

A man, an upright, good man. A man following the rules, praying the liturgy, leading a community of faith, is praying in the Temple and he looks over his shoulder and sees another man, a man who earns his living by swindling his own people of money.

His prayer continues: “thank God that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector”

And the other man, the tax collector, who made an unsavory living collaborating with the Romans who occupied his land by collecting Roman taxes from his fellow Jews.

Offers a prayer of confession and of asking for forgiveness.

Both men are in the Temple. A setting where prayer is commonplace. Where no one can judge just by observing another person. A place where interiority is made known before God alone.

It is a story about prayer. (Eugene Peterson)

It is a story about forgiveness. (John Caputo)

It is a story about humility. (

And peeling off the layers, it is at its core a story that challenges comparison.

Dominic John Crossan modernizes this parable by saying the Pope and a pimp go down to St Peters Cathedral to pray. The contrast is that stark.

And in the presence of two opposites:
One judges and the other asks for forgiveness.

Isn't true that we so often:
judge ourselves by our intention and we judge others by their behavior (Steven Covey)

And yet as Henri Nouwen describes in his writing:
Judgement of others is more accurately a form of self-rejection.

For my friends, deep down any two people are not that far away from each other.

Perhaps the very thing that the Pharisee doesn't like in the tax collector, he knows in himself.
And something in him is yet to accept the very thing that he recognizes in this other.
Rejecting the other is rejecting this part of himself.
And both parts of himself belong in the Temple – in the place where we worship God.

And the good news that it is precisely that thing – that will be a moment of grace for him.

As Psalm 84 says:

The valley of Baca – that dry, arid, thirsty valley, the valley of weeping. A place of desolation or utter loneliness. Can become a place of springs – when we set our heart on inner pilgrimage.

I have in my spiritual journey really appreciated the writing of Parker Palmer, Founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage & Renewal, he is a speaker and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change.
He is a member of the Religious Society of Friends, a Quaker.

And in his book, A hidden wholeness, he describes the journey from living a divided life to undivided life.

Living the divided life is a form of compartmentalization.
Where parts of our selves are kept separate from each other.

He says we can spot the divided life when find ourselves

- refusing to invest ourselves in our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve
- making our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it
- remaining in settings or relationships that steadily kill our spirits
- harboring secrets to achieve personal gain at the expense of others
- hiding our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge and change
- concealing our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked.

Dividedness is a personal issue, but it soon becomes a problem for other people.

Sufi poet Rumi writes:

if you are here unfaithfully with us
you're causing terrible damage.

Parker Palmer writes that the divided life, at bottom, is not a failure of ethics, it is a failure of human wholeness.

Priests judge the confessor, Doctors are dismissive of their patients, politicians who lie to the voters, executives who cheat retirees out of their savings...

For the most part do not lack ethical knowledge or convictions.

They doubtless took courses on professional ethics and probably received top grades.

Instead they had well – rehearsed habits of holding their own knowledge and beliefs at great remove from the living of their lives.

So, what does it take to journey toward an undivided life?

What would it take for the Pharisee to in humility and honesty turn to the Tax Collector and say: Me too?

Perhaps it is what Parker Palmer refers to as a community of solitudes.

- A place to support the inner journey, to allow each soul to be safe enough to show up and speak its truth. Where role and social status do not overpower honest journey.
- A place that doesn't have one way to journey but opens up a space that helps people listen to the Spirit - their inner teacher.
- It is the complex balance of being alone together. Being present to one another on our unique lonely journeys.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his classic book Life Together:

Let the one who cannot be alone beware of community. Let the one who is not in community beware of being alone.

We create spaces very easily to be intelligent,

We create spaces to be emotional,

We create spaces to parade our successes and to let our egos show up

But creating spaces for our souls – that part of us that communes with God and integrates us into wholeness is shy and protective.

In our community smaller groups or one on one conversation are ideal spaces for honest and humble integration:

The Pilgrim study is becoming that, the Universal Christ study,
The Wednesday contemplative/reflective community that meets from 10-12.
In these spaces it is becoming safe to sit together and let what shows up, show up.

Spaces that are neither invasive or evasive.

A place where every now and then the ego can melt away – and humility can appear.

Reflective Question in Silence

What does it mean for you to humble yourself?

How do we live a life beyond comparison? Beyond the divided self?