

In the Presence

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

20th Sunday after Pentecost - October 23, 2022

Texts: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Psalm 84:1-7; Luke 18:9-14

SCRIPTURE READING 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From 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. At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But 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. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To God be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 84:1-7

How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Beloved;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,

and the swallow a nest for herself,

A place where she may lay her young,

at your altars, O God of hosts.

Happy are those who live in your house;

they are always singing your praise.

Happy are those whose strength is in you,

in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley of sorrow,

they make it a place of springs;

the early rain also covers it with pools.

They go from strength to strength;

The God of gods will be revealed in peace and power.

GOSPEL READING Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. 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." 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!" I 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.'



Are birds closer to heaven because they have wings? Psalm 84 brims with enthusiasm for the beauty of God's house. Who's there? Birds! The sparrow. The nesting swallow. Why do they get to enjoy the presence of God when we wingless humans are still toiling along through the valley of sorrow? We keep going because we long for something we believe in, at least on our good days. We persist, seeking what we still can't see. We carry hope in our hearts. Hope gives us strength to go on climbing. At least on our good days.

But what about the other days, when the valley is too lonesome, and the wilderness is full of snakes and demons, when the path always leads uphill but you never get to the place with a view? And there are no springs of water anywhere, and even the birds stop singing and hide their heads beneath their wings. No wonder the apostle Paul compared his life to a fight, a struggle, a race, and looked forward to departing this life.



Being homesick for heaven, I've heard it called. But sometimes it's important to look around at those who share the road with us, too Human friends, furry friends, feathered, and flowering friends—all of them. That's one reason why it sometimes helps to come to church, though church isn't the only place we can find fellow pilgrims. They're all around us. We just need eyes to see them and ourselves honestly. And that doesn't always happen in church, either.



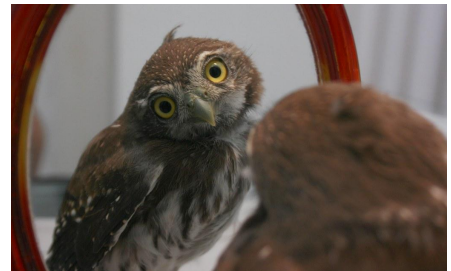
Like the morning these two guys both showed up at church. One was a pillar of the congregation, a fine family man. His annual pledge stretched his personal budget a bit, but he was glad to do his part to keep the old church going. He was known for his good morals, his public contributions to the community. He sat in the front pew and sang the hymns in a clear strong voice. The other was a "gangsta," a leader of the shadow community, the local drug scene. He was especially good at giving people just enough of their drug of choice to keep them coming back, and keep them in his debt. Who knew what even brought him to church that day for the first time? He knew he looked different than the regulars with his gold chains and tattoos. So he just sat in the narthex, thinking about how he'd messed up his life, how he'd messed up other people's lives. "God," he said, "I'm not sure even you can help someone like me, but I sure wish you would." The upright citizen caught a glimpse of him and shuddered: "Thank God I'm not like that guy!"

Which one would Jesus say went home justified? In the parable, Jesus doesn't say whether either one changed their ways. But we know that one felt the need for change, and longed to know God's grace, and the other was perfectly content with his lot in life and his standing with God.

Jesus also doesn't tell us that they stopped to chat on their way out of the temple. Maybe the gulf between them was just too deep and wide.

But what if the solid citizen hadn't been quite so pleased with himself? Would he have seen the other man's sincerity and his troubled mind? What if they had actually had a conversation, and found some common ground? Would they each have shifted their own positions just a little bit? Or did the caste system, the social hierarchy of the day, make that impossible? If so, it's a shame, because that would have been a holy encounter. Every encounter is a holy encounter. Even with ourselves, if we see truly!

An old fairy tale involves a beautiful witch with a magic mirror. Every day the witch confidently asks the mirror, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" And the mirror answers truthfully and satisfies the witch's vanity. Until one day the truth doesn't satisfy anymore. She is no longer the fairest. We know the rest of the story, how she flies into a murderous rage, makes a poisoned apple, puts the beautiful girl, who is also kind and humble, into an enchanted sleep, until the prince comes to kiss her awake.



In the book *Caste*, the subject of our discussion today, author Isabel Wilkerson describes that witch's attitude at work in our own social system. The effect is something far deeper, more toxic, and harder to identify than blatant racism. Caste is the bones, the unseen structure; race is the skin, the outward appearance. When someone's assumed superiority is challenged, there's trouble. Upper-caste people have taken their status for granted for so long they don't, *can't* see it; but when a lower-caste person achieves a higher rank, they fear, mistakenly, that their own position is in jeopardy. Political views aside, many white people felt threatened that a smart, articulate, educated man could attain the highest office in the land *even though he was Black*. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the greatest of them all?" What happens if we realize our identity has been built on the lie that we're naturally greater than others? Who am I, if there's no one to be better than?¹ (Note the tail!)

The gift of pilgrimage, of traveling this valley of sorrow, is not just the glorious destination waiting for us if we persevere. The gift for today is those who travel with us. All of them. They can mirror us more clearly than the shiny reflective thing on the wall. And they do mirror us truthfully, if they are truly our friends and not bootlicking flatterers. Even those we consider different or adverse to us may show us how



¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, 2021. From the chapter, "Dominant Group Status Threat and the Precarity of the Highest Rung."

we've gone astray, how we've rated ourselves too highly—or too lowly. One of my favorite quotes is: “It’s good to have an end to journey toward, but it’s the journey that matters in the end.”² It matters how we relate to the rest of the world, how we travel with others, how we share the load, how we listen, how we speak. How we love beyond our differences, as Jesus loves. How we love changes how we live, and how we die.



Maybe birds have been on my heart this week because they so often seem to come as messengers straight from God’s holy house, from a place unstained by sin. This past week, two friends told me of unusual visitations of birds coming close, fearlessly. They linked those visits to the death of a loved one: grief was comforted. My friend Laura added, “Love connects us all.” Call me crazy, but I take these messages seriously. After all, the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove. Jesus did not leave his disciples comfortless; he gave them to one another as gift and task—as mirror and as teacher—as fellow pilgrims, just muddling through like we are. And God does not abandon us. The road may be rocky, but God shows up everywhere, if we pay attention. We see and feel God in every holy encounter—and every encounter *is* holy. Love connects us all.

Prayers

O look and wonder, how good it is when all your people dwell in peace together. We do not have to walk this lonesome valley by ourselves; thank you for giving us fellow pilgrims to reflect us to ourselves.

Give us grace to know our place with all your people: not as lords of creation, or superior to others, but equally loved, equally troubled, equally in need of your mercy.

Our world, too, needs mercy and tenderness and healing: healing from the scars of a pandemic that still sickens and kills too many; healing from divisions based on lies that stoke resentment and anger; healing from wars that injure the innocent; healing from deeply ingrained flaws in our ways of thinking about ourselves and others. Heal us, dear God.

As we anticipate changes in our lives and in our congregation, let us use this season of stewardship to strengthen our love for one another and our witness to the world. Help us not to be afraid of the future, but to keep on speaking your gospel, with all the gifts we can give.

Let your Spirit descend like a dove with healing in her wings on those who mourn, those who are ill or lonely, those who grow weary with the road they travel. Hear us as we pray in your name, Our Father and Mother in heaven...

² Ursula LeGuin. Frequently quoted.