

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from October 28, 2007

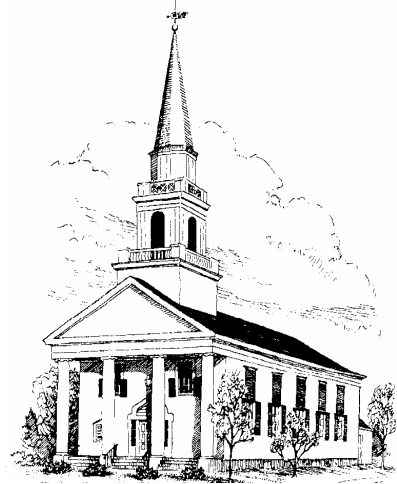
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Heartfelt Prayers”

Scriptures:

Joel 2:23-32

Luke 18:9-14



So here we are in the 3rd week of this year's stewardship campaign entitled “Moving Forward Together”. Many have already responded to the letter from the Stewardship Committee. Many have submitted their pledge for the new fiscal year. We give thanks that early returns are quite promising as members and friends of this congregation respond generously to the invitation to participate fully and to engage with the community here as we move forward together into the future. We need to continue hearing from all of you! Please help us by getting your pledge card in early this year. Following my remarks, we will again hear from a member of this church (and his son) as we hear personal testimonies about the importance of this church in our lives.

We celebrate that last Sunday this congregation voted in the Search Committee for a new settled pastor. We also celebrate that the Search Committee has already met and that they are scheduling meetings.

Last week we asked the question “What's on our heart?” We spoke about the idea that God offers us the chance for each of us to be transformed at the very center of our being. We were reminded that God, through Jesus Christ, has written a covenant on each of our hearts. Last Sunday we invited folks to consider what must die in our lives for something new to be reborn in each of us. What is the old growth in each of us that needs to be pruned away so that something new can happen? Being prepared for change to happen takes a little effort and work on each of our parts.

This church will be able to move forward together if we understand that, no matter what happens in the coming months, it will involve change. Change is inevitable. Change is a given. We may not like change very much yet change is a constant and we need to be working together as we move forward.

Yesterday, 10 of the 12 deacons of this church spent 4 hours together with a retreat leader who came as a resource to us from the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ. Mike Penn-Strah helped us consider how to listen carefully for where God is calling us to go, both as deacons and as a congregation.

We spent time discerning how we pay attention to God, how we listen and learn from the Risen Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit that moves in us and with us. We spent time considering where God is calling us, how we might need to change, and how the power of the Holy Spirit might be inspiring us to move into the future together. Your deacons spent time together in prayer, meditation, and in thoughtful listening and reflecting with one another because they care deeply for this church and this community of faith and because they are hopeful about this church as it moves forward together.

Today we have a parable that Jesus told which raises any number of questions. We might wonder—are we supposed to identify with someone in this parable and is it the Pharisee or the tax collector? We might wonder—what is prayer all about, anyway, and what constitutes a heartfelt prayer? We might wonder—how do we come to God with our hearts fully open to God? We might wonder—if we come to God with our confession, will God love us in spite of the mistakes we've made? We might wonder—does God really love me?

So the Pharisee, pictured here as the epitome of a religion of good works, has much to brag about. This guy belongs in the temple, if anyone does. And I am convinced he's not a hypocrite, he is not a liar, and there is no reason to believe that he is an unusually proud or self-centered person. He is simply telling the truth. He is a good man. He is just, he is faithful to his vows, he is very conscientious about fulfilling his religious duties—he fasts, he tithes and, as we see from the parable, he prays.

On the other hand, the tax collector does none of that. Remember, tax collectors (the King James Version calls them “publicans”) were not just unpopular civil servants. They were collaborators. They had abandoned the law of Moses and were unclean. They robbed their own people for personal gain and to underwrite the hated Roman overlords. They had traded their birthright, their brothers and sisters, and their heritage for a pretty good piece of change. They were rich, but they were hated. A Pharisee could not marry into a family that contained a tax collector, and so on. Meanwhile, the tax collectors cried all the way to the bank.

Now, be honest, remembering that tax collectors didn't tithe—who would you rather have join the parish, or start dating your kid, or have your child use as a role model? The fact is, everybody is not morally equal, and the Pharisee was a better person, morally, socially, and, no doubt, personally, than the tax collector.

Now, you have to admit that all of this counts for something. To live a morally upright life is better than not to do that. To fast, pray, and give is better than not to do those things. To live as God calls us to live is better than not to live that way. We believe that to live as God calls us to live is to live richer, deeper, and more complete lives. We are not all equal, and it does make a difference. Our lives can be better than they are now.

But there are still some places where we are all absolutely equal and the

ground at the foot of the cross is level. To stand there, which is where we stand when we stand before God, is to stand without difference, and without advantage, and without any prayer but one: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" The primary reason this is true is not because of who we are. The primary reason we only have that one prayer is because of who God is.

When we stand at the foot of the cross, when we stand in the presence of God, we are not visiting Santa at the department store or a genie out of a fairy tale. Instead, we are in the presence of a God who is righteous, who is holy and who is just; a God who demands of us righteousness, holiness, and justice. We are in the presence of a God who has made for us as great a sacrifice as we can imagine, and who says that we should do the same sort of thing. When we stand before God, we stand before the creator of the universe, the giver of the law, and the judge of all people.

The more honest we are about who God is, and about who we are in the presence of God, the more that tax collector's prayer makes sense, the more it becomes our prayer. That's the bad news. The good news is that he, the tax collector, 'went down to his house justified', the text tells us. The good news is that being equal in the eyes of God's justice also reveals us to be equal in the eyes of God's love.

The ground at the foot of the cross is level, dead level. In the same way, the resurrection reaches out to all of creation with a power and a force that is beyond our imagining and beyond our hoping. Our prayer is the prayer of the tax collector but, at its heart, it is a shout of joy, a sign, not of our victory, but of the victory of Jesus." (Sermon found online by The Rev. James Liggett, Rector of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Big Spring, Texas and preached first in October, 2004.)

If we are ready to be honest with ourselves and with God, we can stand at that dead level at the foot of the cross and we, too, can pray, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" When we recognize that the ground beneath the cross is level and that it is a place where we all meet, then we recognize that God will hear our heartfelt prayers. God will listen to us. God will hear our prayers. God's grace will be there for each and every one of us. In spite of all our mistakes and failures, God loves us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

