

“God be merciful to me, a sinner”

A Homily delivered by Len Friesen at WNMC (Matins Service)

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Jeremiah 14: 7-12, 19-22; II Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18; and Luke 18: 9-14.

There is something bittersweet about the passage that Bernie just read from 2nd Timothy, isn't there? On the one hand, it contains great sadness as it speaks directly to the end of life, the final days. It describes that precious time as a race that is almost over, and a libation to the Divine that has been almost completely poured out. So it is that our own lives end, and those whom we love. Yet this passage also contains words of great assurance, for the Apostle Paul, the writer, also declares with conviction: *“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 me on the day”* of His appearing. There is much to ponder in this little passage but I have framed my homily this morning around a five word phrase contained within it. I believe that the passages from Jeremiah and Luke speak directly to those 5 words, and although the language of Jeremiah may seem the most archaic to our ears, I believe that the Lukan passage should provoke us much more. And the 5 little words? They are these, from 2nd Timothy 4 verse 7: *“I have kept the faith”*. (repeat)

Exactly what faith does the Apostle Paul refer to here? What faith has he faithfully kept? Obviously today's homily can't even scratch the surface of the surface of how we might answer this question. But it might at least allow us to ponder what the Holy Spirit had in mind when the larger church put 2nd Timothy's assurance of faithful living together with this particular passage from Jeremiah, and this particular passage from Luke.

So let's turn to Luke first, a passage which I believe challenges us as much as any in the New Testament. Luke first declares in today's Gospel reading that Jesus told the following parable to those who deemed themselves righteous, and held others in contempt. Then, immediately, our Lord tells us that two people go up to the temple to pray. The first, a Pharisee, does not lack for a good self-image: he thanks God that he is not like others who have faltered. His has been a heroic life of faithfulness: he has

not been a thief, a rogue, an adulterer or even a tax collector. One imagines he never had overdue library books. Our Pharisee has fasted regularly. He has tithed. You read Jesus's description of the Pharisee and think: sounds like he'd be a good guy to have as a neighbour. Sounds like church leadership material. Sounds like the kind of person you'd like to see yourself as, or have others see you at least. Actually, it sounds like someone who sees himself as so put together he doesn't need anyone. Even God seems somehow beside the point for him, for the Pharisee asks nothing of the Divine. It is as if his own self-satisfaction and good-old faithful living have overwhelmed any needs he may have of His creator.

Then there's the tax collector, a clear signal in the text that this is a moral loser. Think Donald Trump. Think the dread Andrew Sheer for all good progressive thinkers, for no New Testament persona were lower than Tax Collectors. They were thieves, sell-outs to the Romans, and just plain greedy. None of us would have wanted to associate with them. I doubt that they'd be welcome here quite frankly, or at our kitchen tables. So this Tax Collector shows up at the Temple and, unbelievably, is honest for a change. He doesn't sugar-coat anything. Everything about him speaks to his own understanding that he is profoundly unworthy before God. So all he manages to do is beat his breast – a clear indication of deep distress – and utter this simple phrase: “*God be merciful to me, a sinner.*” (repeat) Jesus gives no indication that that Tax Collector will stop being a thief, that he will change his ways when he leaves the Temple. There is no indication that the Tax Collector will begin to fast, let alone tithe. There's no indication of anything, really, except his own utter sinfulness and his miserable plea for mercy.

Then Our Lord concludes with these sobering words when He declares that only the tax collector returned home justified. For, in Jesus' words from Luke 18: 14, “*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*”

So where are we in this parable? How much do we ground our personal faith journeys or our worship services upon the simple words of the tax collector: “*God be merciful to me, a sinner*”? How much do we build our funeral services around this core

and long held Mennonite conviction which simply declares: *Here lies a sinner who needed a Savior? Thank God he found one.* I want to say this with deep love, but I feel compelled to say it: I have sometimes thought, after funerals or any service really, if what we are really saying is this: “We are so wonderful, so accomplished, so righteous that the last thing on earth or in death we need is a Savior. In fact, we have options God, if you’re even listening that is. And we’ll get back to you.”

So we may show up at the temple, but without the tax collector’s pathetic prayer in our hearts or on our lips. Instead, we take our usual place beside the Pharisee, give him a wink, and act as if we’ve already saved ourselves. No redeemer needed.

Of course, the truth is we haven’t. In fact, we cannot and never will save ourselves. Each of us knows of the multiple times when we have sinned against God in thought and word and deed, by what we have done, and what we have failed to do. And that’s before we get to our role in the apparent destruction of our ecosphere. In fact, if we’re honest, we know that we ourselves have so often worshiped other gods. Even death is a legacy of us having chosen to consume the very thing that would drive us from the One who created us. To state it positively: God did not create us to die; death was our creation.

So what is to be done? For starters, I think we need to allow this parable from Luke 18 to disturb our understanding of who we are, what church is for and what really matters at the end of our days, as the time of our departure draws near. And this takes me to Bernie’s reading from Jeremiah. I can honestly say that I have come to love this passage over the past month or two. I actually find it full of deep, meaning-filled humour. Here is what happens in Jeremiah, who, it turns out, was not a bullfrog. In verse 10 Jeremiah declares that his readers have been wretchedly unfaithful, they have wandered from their faith. They have told lies and denied deep truths, and so God has unleashed terrible hardships on them.

What is so striking for me is how the children of Israel respond in this passage. Not as we might, by putting God on trial as in “How dare you God!”. They also don’t promise to reform their ways and thereafter lead sinless lives. They don’t attempt to rationalize their actions. Instead they respond to God’s condemnation with these

fabulous words from V. 20 and following: *“We acknowledge our wickedness O Lord, the iniquity of our ancestors, for we have sinned against you. Do not spurn us, for your name’s sake. Do not dishonour your glorious throne, and do not break your covenant with us.”*

It’s as if the children of Israel come to accept both their sinfulness and their utter inability to change their ways. Place their response into Luke’s parable and it’s obvious where Jeremiah’s first listeners fit, for like the tax collector, all they can do is beat their breasts and plead with God to be merciful. Then they wait. Of course, the children of Israel could not have been certain in Jeremiah’s time that the Lord of the universe would be merciful in the end; that he would respond to this confession of both their sinfulness and their utter inability to save themselves.

But we know God’s answer, don’t we. We know that in the fullness of time He took our form, the form of a slave in fact and allowed himself to be born in human likeness. We know that the one born in a stable and resurrected from a cave was, is and ever shall be Messiah because he alone took upon himself the sins of the world, such that even death was once and for all robbed of its power. And we know that those who die in his name will henceforth not really die at all, including in the 1001 little to big deaths we experience on any given week. None of this any longer has any power over us in Christ’s name.

We know all this to be true; or at least we knew it once. Maybe it’s time to know it again. Alongside the tax collector and Jeremiah’s first listeners, may God grant us the life-liberating, death destroying courage to set our Pharisaic self-satisfaction aside, and to humbly follow the Only One who can save us.

“To Him alone be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”