

“All Who Humble Themselves...”

Sirach 35:12-17; Luke 18:9-14

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Our first reading this morning comes from the book of Sirach. That’s one that you might not be familiar with. It is in the part of the Bible that we Protestants call the “Apocrypha,” which is a group of about 14 books that are included in *some* ancient editions of the Bible, but not others. Generally speaking, these books were written after the books of the Old Testament but before the coming of Christ. They are of Jewish origin, and many of them were well known by early Christians. Catholic and Orthodox churches consider these books equally as authoritative as other books of the Bible; other Christian traditions consider them useful for teaching and instruction but not for the establishment of doctrine. Martin Luther included these books in his translation of the Bible; they were also included in early printings of the King James Version. But later Protestants rejected the Apocrypha wholesale, considering them of no more value than any other human writings. That attitude prevailed for the next several hundred years, until about the middle of the 20th century, when many Protestants began to take a renewed interest in these writings, and began printing them in Bibles again. Today, some portions of the Apocrypha are included as an option in the lectionary.

So for today I had a choice between including a reading from Jeremiah or from this book, which has the complicated name “Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach.” To be honest, I just felt that this apocryphal reading spoke more plainly and compellingly to me than the passage from Jeremiah. So I am preaching today, for the first time in my life, on a passage from the Apocrypha. Not that my whole sermon will be about it; we’re going to turn to the Luke passage in a little bit.

Who was this man, “Jesus the Son of Sirach”? Not Jesus of Nazareth, of course. Jesus was a fairly common name; it’s the Greek form of the Jewish name “Joshua.” Joshua in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament share the same name. So does this man, “Jesus the Son of Sirach,” who probably lived a couple hundred years before Jesus of Nazareth. He was a wise man who lived in Jerusalem; the book is a collection of his wisdom. It is similar to the book of Proverbs, but longer. In the first few centuries A.D. it was frequently read in churches, which is how it got its other name, “Ecclesiasticus;” it was called in Latin “Liber Ecclesiasticus,” which means “Book of the Church.”

The passage from Sirach is very straightforward. “Give to the Most High as he has given to you and as generously as you can afford.” Now I would remind you that it is stewardship season; it is that time of the year when we ask everyone to examine their faith and their finances and make a pledge of commitment to the mission of the church for the coming year. “Give to the Most High as he has given to you.” That simple bit of teaching suggests that our giving to the church should be in proportion to God’s generosity to us. We have been blessed with housing, food, clothes, all the basics of life, plus, for many of us, sufficient income to cover our utility bills, vacations, the ability to put our kids through school, cars, furniture, opportunities to eat out, trinkets both large and small, savings and investment

accounts, and so much more. So many of us have been very richly blessed. Sirach is telling us to give as generously to the church as God has given to us, a proportional amount. Other passages in scripture advise us to give a tenth of our income back to God. Sirach goes even further; he tells us to “give as generously as you can afford.” The idea is not – and never should be – that we should give based on what we *feel we are getting out of the church*. That’s a self-centered approach. No, the question is, *how much has GOD given to us*, in the whole of our life. *That* is the basis for our giving. It’s a *God-centered* approach. First we look at all of God’s many blessings to us – including God’s ultimate act of self-sacrifice on the cross, which was *solely for our benefit* – and then we willingly and voluntarily surrender a generous portion of our lives back to God, in thanks and gratitude and praise. “For the Lord is the one who repays,” says Sirach, “and he will repay you sevenfold.”

And what then does the church *do* with that money? We use it to do the two fundamental things Jesus told us to do: *love God* and *love our neighbor*. Loving God – that’s our act of worship; it’s all the expense that goes into offering high-quality worship services week after week. And it’s our teaching ministries, our ongoing efforts to raise up children and new believers in the faith, sharing the good news of the Gospel far and wide. Loving our neighbor – that’s all the things that we do to reach out and help people, both within and beyond this community of faith. It’s the work of the Mission Committee, the support we give to various agencies near and far that provide tangible benefits in people’s lives; it’s the ministry of the Deacons, as they seek to give hope and comfort and joy directly to people in need. Sirach says that God “will not ignore the supplication of the orphan or the widow when she pours out her complaint.” We, the church, are God’s primary agent on earth; it’s *our* job to be hearing the cries of the orphans and the widows and all other hurting people, and reaching out to them with the love of Jesus Christ. Our ability to do that well is *directly* related to *your* generosity.

So I invite you to heed this call, to respond to the love and grace that God has given you, to ponder anew all the many ways in which your life had been blessed by God, and to give proportionally and generously in return. Reminder: we’d like to have your pledge of commitment by next Sunday!

So now let us turn our attention to Luke’s gospel, to this story that is called “the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican,” a story found only in Luke. Note the context: Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Jesus didn’t tell this parable because *everybody* needed to hear it. He told this parable because *some* people needed to hear it. The ones who were self-righteous, prideful; the ones who thought they were *better* than other people. Be careful here; please don’t assume that this parable wasn’t meant for *you*. If you think he’s not speaking to you, then you’re probably one of the ones who needs to hear it *the most*.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” This story takes place at the temple in Jerusalem, though it could have happened at any synagogue, or any church. The Pharisees were the well-educated Jews, the ones who meticulously studied the scriptures, the ones who scrupulously followed every jot and tittle of the Jewish law, but in the process they often neglected basic values like justice and mercy and faith. Tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman government to collect taxes from the common people. Some of them collected far more than what was required and pocketed the difference. As a group they were hated and distrusted simply because of their perceived collaboration with the Roman overlords and their oppressive regime. Older translations of the Bible call tax collectors “publicans;” that word basically means they were “public contractors,” and they sometimes had other responsibilities for the good of the public. The meaning of the word “publican” has changed over time – today, it primarily refers to someone who owns a pub!

So we’ve got a Jewish religious leader on the one hand, and a Jewish tax collector on the other.

Both go up to the temple to pray. “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.’” Now before we are too quick to judge the Pharisee, let’s take note of what he is doing right: he’s not a thief, he’s not a rogue, he’s not an adulterer. There’s probably a whole long list of other things that he’s not. If we were to go back and re-read the Ten Commandments, I’d be quite sure that he would be faithfully observing every single one. Plus, he fasts twice a week, which is more than what was required; Jews were commanded to fast only once per year, on the Day of Atonement. All other fasts were voluntary. *And*, he tithes, setting aside a tenth of his earnings and offering them to God, as prescribed by the Jewish law. In many respects, he’s doing *exactly* what God asks *all* of us to do, and even more. He’s trying to live a faithful life.

But the problem is – he’s *prideful*. He’s haughty; he’s arrogant; he basically thinks he’s better than everyone else. And, perhaps worse, he seems to think that there’s nothing he needs to work on, no sin anywhere in his life that he needs to confess or repent from. Even the greatest saints who have ever lived were painfully aware of the sin that still existed in their lives. None of us ever get fully free from it. The instant we start thinking there is nothing we need to confess, nothing we need to *improve* in our fidelity before God, is the instant we fall straight back into sin: the sin of pride.

Now the tax collector, on the other hand, had a different problem. “The tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” Again, he’s definitely doing some things right. He is fully aware of his sin, *painfully* aware of his sin. Perhaps he is one of those tax collectors who has wrongfully defrauded his fellow citizens. He is coming to the temple, like coming to church, taking full advantage of the opportunity to prayerfully confess his sins and plead for God’s mercy. He knows full well that God calls us to live lives of justice, fairness, kindness, decency, and respect for all people. And he knows full well that he hasn’t been living that kind of a life. It appears that he sincerely wants to change. But perhaps he is being a bit *too* hard on himself. He stands “far off” – as if he thinks he’s not worthy to approach the throne of God’s almighty grace. He “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven,” as was the custom when people prayed. It is as if he does not feel like he really *belongs* there, as if God’s temple is only for the people who are *worthy*. Let me tell you, friends, the church is not – or should not be – a hotel for saints, but rather a hospital for sinners. I have met people in the past who felt like they *weren’t* worthy to come to church, people who felt like they had to get their life straightened up *before* they would consider showing up at our front door. That is not how it is supposed to be! Of all the places in the world, the church should be the place that *most* welcomes a person who has an earnest desire to straighten up their life, the place where someone should feel the *most comfortable* saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” We’re not perfect, none of us are. *All* of us have stuff we need to work on, sins we need to confess, habits and practices and attitudes we need to repent.

Jesus is clear how he feels about these two individuals: “I tell you, this man” – the tax collector – “went down to his home justified rather than the other.” Why? Because “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” The Pharisee, who was doing *so many things right*, was rejected in God’s eyes for one and only one reason: his *attitude*. His *pride*. And the tax collector, who may have been doing *many things wrong*, was welcomed in God’s eyes for one and only one reason: his *attitude*. His *humility*. You can be doing *so many things right*; you can be so *faithful* in *so many aspects of your life*. But if you’re prideful, haughty, arrogant ... well ... all I can say is ... *may God have mercy on your soul*. You would do well to consider some sincere *repentance*.

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