

Sermon – Proper 25 – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

Luke 18: 1-4

In my days as a hospital chaplain I encountered a wide range of people, whose only common denominator was that they were sick. I encountered people of most mainline religious denominations. People who were very devout and others not so much. People who were spiritual but not religious and many, many lapsed Roman Catholics. People of all races. Immigrants, the rich, the poor and the unemployed. Even one past Governor.

This time exposed me to the wonderful richness of God's kingdom, made manifest in all of these people that I met and ministered to. In these pastoral meetings I came to understand that God was seen and understood in many different ways. To some word God was unmentionable, to others God meant Allah and to many others God was a distant and stern father figure, floating high in the heavens on a big white cloud. God also was a God of Love to many.

For us as Anglican Episcopalians, we should be able to come to define God through our understanding of the characteristics of God. It is the characteristics of God that reveal to us God's true nature. That true nature is most especially revealed in the person Jesus Christ. "If you really know me, you will know my father as well," Jesus says as recorded in John 14:7. It is through our detailed knowledge of Jesus that we come to have knowledge of God. Prior to the incarnation people learnt about this same God through the witness of the prophets who had unique relationships with God.

As humans we inherently see the world in dualistic terms. By this I mean we tend to view aspects of our lives as either one thing or another. Black or white. Right or wrong. Good or bad. Righteous or sinful. "Dualistic thinking, or the "egoic operating system," author Richard Rohr says, "is our way of reading reality from the position of our private and small self. "What's in it for me?" "How will I look if I do this?" This is the ego's preferred way of seeing reality. It is the ordinary "hardware" of almost all Western people, even those who think of themselves as Christians."¹

This inherent dualistic way of thinking therefore shades our thinking about God. God is either a God of love and forgiveness or God is a God of wrath and punishment. Many of my patients were weighed down with an understanding of God, more aligned with the second type. They were weighed down with guilt and often felt their illness was punishment for something they had done earlier in their life.

Rohr goes on to say, "We do need the dualistic mind to function in practical life, however, and to do our work as a teacher, a nurse, a scientist, or an engineer. It's helpful and fully necessary as far as it goes, but it just doesn't go far enough. The dualistic mind cannot process things like

¹ Rohr, R *The Dualistic Mind* January 29, 2017 – www.cac.org

infinity, mystery, God, grace, suffering, sexuality, death, or love; this is exactly why most people stumble over these very issues.”

If we remain dualistic thinkers when we try to come to define God we do risk boxing God in, bringing down God to our level. Jesus probably was the first person who we can safely say had a non-dualistic mind. He was able to see things that none of his contemporaries could see and much of his teaching was trying to shape for them a new way to see the world about them. And now for us.

The parable Jesus tells in the gospel reading you heard this morning falls into the category of people with dualistic thinking. The Pharisee in today’s reading, stands in a prominent place within the temple and offers his prayers. He is bound by Torah tradition and his life is shaped by the Law and its many regulations. In his prayer he thanks God that he is “not like others: thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like this tax collector,” no doubt turning and pointing him out to God. The Pharisee is a devout man and generous by tithing to the temple as required. However, he puts himself in a box of righteousness, a box that excludes many others who he says are not like him.

Now we might also say in our hearts that we too give thanks that we are not like a lot of other people in society – murderers, sex offenders, criminals, perpetrators of gun violence, bullies and much more. It seems logical to our human mind, but if we see it through the mind of Christ we are separating ourselves, from the very people that need us and our love, the very people Jesus healed and forgave.

For the Pharisee, the God who blesses only the religious people is a God who can be manipulated. God is not about who is better than, smarter than, prettier than, richer than, holier than. To take this view of God is to see God as wrath filled, judgmental and violent toward those we see as less than ourselves.

On the other hand the publican stands in the temple far off and away from the pious, head bowed and beating his breast in contrition. He stands away in the shadows crying out for mercy for his sins. Publicans had pretty bad reputations and were despised by most people because they were seen to be getting rich from skimming off the taxes they collected for the occupying Romans.

The God of the publican is a God who answers prayer and this is the God who we find in the person of Jesus Christ. The publican is not expressing some poor old woe is me syndrome. He simply and honestly acknowledges himself before God for his actions. He sins, therefore he is a sinner in need of mercy and forgiveness and healing. Aren’t we all.

As a community church reaching out to our neighbors it is important I feel for us to have a clear sense of who God is in our lives and a clear sense of how we reflect God out into the world. Many people in our community view God as a God of retribution and judgement because that is how they have been taught and how Christians are often portrayed in the media. It is not only

the extremists like the Westboro Baptist Church who's flock espouses God's judgement on sinners in confronting ways, the wider church struggles often to be fully inclusive as God would want us to be.

I see therefore our mission as a people of faith in a changing community to clearly articulate the God of Jesus Christ, and to reflect those characteristics as we set about our ministry to our neighbors. Today's gospel reading sets up the question beautifully for us. "Who is God for us, and how do we reflect the God as revealed in Jesus to the world?" It is the question that I propose to put at the heart of our year of stewardship.

The vestry has been discussing undertaking stewardship differently this year. Too often stewardship is focused only on money and the annual pledge appeal. We read two books that have helped us to shape the year of stewardship we are launching. The first book was *Transforming Stewardship* by Canon Chuck Robertson, a canon to the Presiding Bishop. The second book was *The Spirituality of Fundraising* by Henri Nouwen.

The key understanding I was hoping to convey to the vestry and for them to prayerfully discern was that church stewardship is a holistic, year-long discipline that aims to clearly articulate the mission and ministry of the church and seeks your support through prayer, action and your financial commitment. Don't get me wrong your financial support is a crucial element of the ongoing life of this community, but we want to ensure you have a clear vision of what this church seeks to be, for both the worshipping community and the neighbors that surround us.

So let me outline a couple of the main pillars of the plan for this year.

Theme: *A Year of Reflection on the role of our church in this community*

- What is our identity and our purpose?
- Why should congregants support the purpose of the church?
- Honor the past, learn from it – how has the spirit worked here for 180 years
- Map out the future of the church's role for the community (internal and external)

How:

1. 'Walking in the Old Ways' (from Rev George Van der Water's sermon on St Luke's Day 1915 (rector 1880-87)
 - Where we are going is connected to where we have been
 - What have been the key historical phases of St Luke's, what is our history. You may not know but there is a dark cloud that hangs over the actions of the first congregation on this site. We all need to know about this because we need to own it
 - What are our sacred stories, what are the key turning points (1950s transition for example)
 - What were the significant obstacles the parish overcame and how
 - Oral histories from surviving parishioners
 - Document our story and publish it

2. 'Walking to the new Zion' – where do we need to go?
 - Research the community in which we are based and try and identify new opportunities for mission and ministry
 - What impact can we have as Christians on our neighborhood
 - What are the demographic shifts underway here and how do we reach new residents
 - How is St Luke and St Matthew perceived in the community
 - How do we build off our strengths and work with our partners such as Gallim and others?

The work to get this plan up and running will be significant and the vestry is asking you to prayerfully consider how you might help. You might be gifted in a profession that helps shape these projects. Are you a historian, writer, community organizer, community leader, politician, are you involved in community organizations that might engage with us on community outreach?

This effort is an effort of the whole church. If the whole church is engaged and supportive then we will be building something for the ongoing expression of God's love for this community. The parish has changed in significant ways since 1840 but the church has always responded and survived through the faith and efforts of its people.

Something struck me in a column in today's NY Times by Nick Kristoff. He cites a Pew Research study that reveals, possibly for the first time, that less than half of all young adults in the US do not identify as Christians. The study concluded that "the US is steadily becoming less Christian and less religiously observant." For those over 70 years, 84% identify as Christian. A vast gap!

Kristoff discusses the ways that Christians are often seen as hypocrites and opposite of the Christians who minister in the shadows of life, those doing incredible work in difficult world and local situations through organizations and even through parish food pantries and feeding programs. We have a role to play in pushing against this trend so we can reach young adults.

Next week I will be writing to each of you with a personal invitation to support this year of reflection on the role of our church in community. I invite you to pray fervently for the parish and for this work that is wholly necessary for us to live out our calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ to the world.

I pray that the Holy Spirit might stir your souls, your memories and your imaginations as we see what God is calling us to do.

Amen