

WHY COME TO CHURCH?

Luke 18: 9-14; 19: 1-10

I went to visit him at home because his son had been in an accident. He lived up in the bush. He had lived there all his life and his parents before him. He wasn't much of a talker, but he softened up with me and opened up a little given my pastoral involvement in offering support to his wife and son. He told me he had gone to the local church when he was a boy once. But his parents were poor and he didn't have special clothes and shoes for church. I asked him why he felt he needed special clothes? He said that it was a sign of respect for God and for the place he was entering. "But didn't the people in the church understand that your parents didn't have the money for special clothes?" This is when I saw his face harden. He said that the people at the door didn't welcome them, and even though they were allowed to go in, people were looking at them, looking down at them it felt like. He never walked into the church again.

When I heard this story I became angry. How could those people in the church have acted this way? But then, I asked myself whether such things happen in our own churches today. Does everyone who walks into the church feel comfortable? Are they welcomed, treated with kindness and consideration? Is our worship service easily followed by those who have little or no background in our style of worship? Do we take the time to reach out to those we haven't met yet or those we haven't seen here before?

Part of it is personality. We need outgoing extroverts in the church who love to meet people, welcoming at the door and in our time of fellowship after worship. We are very fortunate here at Armour Heights that we have a wonderful tradition of hospitality and welcome.

But a big step in this kind of welcoming has to do with how we see people. People may look smart and act smart. People may look successful, attractive, well put together and easy to talk to. But then there may be others who are more quiet, maybe more awkward or out of place. There may be people, and there often are this day and age, who have no idea what a Presbyterian church is all about and why we do what we do as we do it. And then there are those who have made mistakes, those who carry their sense of inadequacy, insufficiency and brokenness on their sleeves. Some people may come across gruff, irritable, angry, suspicious, peculiar, critical. It takes real grace, sincerity and skill to make a connection with those who can strike us in all kinds of ways that are not straightforward.

The question for us is: what is the purpose of church? Long ago, a church leader named Augustine had an argument with a group of people called Donatists. Donatists believed that if you called yourself a Christian and belonged to the church, you had to live it. If someone criticized you for being a Christian you had to stand up for your faith. Fear, moral failure, doubts, struggles or emotional instability could not be part of the Christian life. The church should be a place for the righteous, those who stand apart from the rest of society in their morality, holiness and solid faith.

But Augustine had a big problem with this way of thinking. He argued for a very different understanding of what makes a Christian. The Christian, he said, is distinguished not because she is morally better than the rest of society, but more aware, more humble and more honest about her human imperfection and brokenness. Christians come to church to receive the beautiful, forgiving, renewing and empowering love of God each and every week. Christians come to church because they know they need something they can't give themselves. The rest of society may not feel that kind of need and therefore not that kind of motivation to enter a community of faith.

So, why do you come to church? Why do I? Let's look at our gospel readings for revelatory guidance.

Our first reading is a story Jesus tells called a parable. There are two characters in this parable. First there is a Pharisee. Let's remember that the world in Jesus' time is a world where everybody is religious. Everybody believes in God. But, what kind of God do people believe in? The Pharisee is someone who has a lot of influence in his society. He believes that in order to be accepted in society, and praised as a good person, you have to practice your faith. This faith is one with a lot of dos and don'ts. You live clean, you follow the rules, you give money for the maintenance of the temple, you fast and you do your prayers every day. There is little tolerance for questions, doubts, mistakes or inner struggles. People have no excuse for messing up, and they should be reprimanded and punished, not let off the hook.

The second character is a tax collector. If the Pharisee represents the moral best of society, the tax collector represents the moral worst. Tax collectors extort money from their own people on behalf of the Romans as taxes, and they take as much money as they can squeeze out of people by any means they can. So, tax collectors are not only thieves who take money until people have no money to give, but they are working for the enemy.

The shocking thing about this parable is Jesus' perspective on who ends up approved by God and who does not. The Pharisee goes to the temple to pat himself on the back, assuming God is very happy with him. He does everything right and so, he has earned his way to receiving all the blessings God can give.

He's not like the repulsive tax collector also praying in the temple. The tax collector, on the other hand, is on his hands and knees feeling awful about himself and pleading for forgiveness. He's ready to give up his awful life but he questions whether it's even possible given all the bad he's done.

According to Jesus, however, it's the tax collector's approach that is welcomed by God, not that of the Pharisee. We come to church to confess our sins in order to experience forgiveness again and again. We don't come to church to convince ourselves of how wonderful we are compared to others. That's why our worship service begins with a call to worship, prayers of approach and confession, and then the sharing of the peace. Without honest, searching approach and genuine confession, the peace of forgiveness is meaningless, unless, of course, we feel we have no sin in us requiring any forgiveness and spiritual renewal. Then why bother coming to church? Social reasons are not enough and they're not the spiritual core of why we should be here.

But this brings us to our second reading, just a chapter later in Luke. Here Jesus is actually engaging a real life tax collector whose name is Zacchaeus. Once again there are people in the crowd who see him as a thief and collaborator with the enemy. How can Jesus want to have anything to do with him other than condemn him as deserving no mercy. But that's not Jesus' approach. Jesus goes to his home, and the very act of treating him like a human being transforms Zacchaeus. It's not just about confession for forgiveness, it's also about being liberated by love to want to do something for others. Zacchaeus is so thrilled with the generous love Jesus offers that he makes a commitment not only to pay back all the money he's taken from people, but to quadruple it. Maybe it's a little over the top, but isn't that what happens when we're so ecstatic, joyful, grateful and alive to the goodness and bounty of God?!

So why are you in church? Why am I? Why do we come?

We come because we're all broken, flawed and imperfect in some way. The traditional word is sinner. We're all sinners. But why has this become such a bad word today? Isn't it liberating to be honest, true and real rather than false, pretentious, hypocritical, arrogant and having to put on a façade? And it's liberating especially when we see church as a place, a unique place in society, where we are free to be ourselves as we are. We confess that we are sinners, all of us. We confess that all the goodness in us is a gift – because of the good influence of others, because of good choices and good opportunities we've been helped and supported in making. So if we have been so fortunate, and if we are in a place where we feel so deeply accepted and understood, then how can we be so unforgiving, impatient, critical and judgemental of others? If God welcomes us here and embraces us as broken sinners, why do we fail to do the same for others. Something is wrong if this is the case.

But we also come here to experience God's love over and over again. In so far as we welcome each other and embrace each other as best we can, we become the body of Christ, the hands, feet and heart of Christ, doing as Christ did for Zacchaeus long ago. And then we are empowered to go back out into the world and give quadruple all the love and goodness we feel inside that God so richly gives to us.

We come to church as broken, flawed, imperfect human beings, as sinners. We can be real here, honest and genuine here. And we can experience the deepest kind of spiritual love here, a love that goes to that dark place where guilt, sadness, emptiness, rage, hopelessness and fear can imprison and paralyze us.

Today is Reformation Sunday. The recognized father of the Protestant Reformation is Martin Luther. One of my favourite quotes from Luther goes like this: "Sinners are not loved because they are lovely. They are lovely because they are loved." When we love each other in all our imperfection and brokenness, we are loving each other into healing. As our hearts begin to heal with the experience of love and acceptance, we begin to see ourselves differently. We don't have to be somebody perfect or better so that others love us. We can be who we are. And as we become more who we are - our true self rather than a false self - we discover that we are, indeed, beautiful and lovely even though we are also sinners. In our discovery of how deeply we are loveable for all our imperfection, we are liberated and empowered to go out and love others as we are loved.

Too bad this man in my story never experienced that in the church when he was a little boy.

But what about you and me? Do we welcome Jesus into our hearts? Do we welcome God into the deepest places within us, the places of deep feeling but also of deep pain; the places of gratitude, certainty and peace in us, but also the places of questioning, uncertainty, sometimes bitterness, resentment, hopelessness and hurt in us also? This is all of us not just some of us, and God wants to be connected to all of us not just some of us. May we trust God enough to let God in, into all of us. May we trust Jesus enough to open the door into our home as Zacchaeus did. May we welcome the sinner into our spiritual community here as we welcome the truth that we are sinners too and God loves us without reserve. Thanks be to God; Amen