

Inside Out
Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher, October 27, 2019
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Luke 18:9-14

One of Jesus' parable takes us to the temple and is directed at the faithful. Let us listen to God's Word for us.

Luke 18:9-14 Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you; this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

This is the Word of the Lord

People: Thanks be to God.

It started with a cough that would not go away. I kept dismissing it as allergies, they are bad this time of year, then there were the nose bleeds, pesky but I figured that they would eventually go away. I was tired, but I had just finished doing an interim so that was understandable. Whatever was happening to my body-I could take care of it. I was losing weight- is that such a bad thing?

Six years ago, I started having these symptoms, but it was manageable. Then my foot started to hurt, a lot, well maybe I should go into urgent care. It was when the doctor looked at my

foot and turned to my husband and said can you get her to the emergency room or shall we call the ambulance. It was at that moment that I realized that maybe I could not handle it after all!

That started a saga that divided my life into the 56 years before to the six years following. The sore foot turned out to be an arterial blood clot caused by an infection in my heart which led to two surgeries in three days, one for the blood clot in my leg, and the other was an emergency open-heart surgery for a heart valve repair.

Because the attentiveness of the medical professionals, and the skills and the care I received, combined with countless prayers, I stand before you today. My vascular surgeon said afterward, “There was someone far greater in the operating room than the surgeons.”

To say that it was a life altering experience would be an understatement. Even six years later, I am still trying to understand the lessons learned from it. Anyone who has had a life altering experience soon learns what it means to be stripped from the work to present yourself in a way that appears to be self-reliant and self-sufficient.

The first 56 years, even though I knew better, there was a part of me that lived by the axiom--if you lived right and did the right thing, if you stay fit and healthy, and drive carefully, you can control what happens to you. Anytime a terrible thing happened to someone else, I would take an inventory in my mind of what they must have been doing wrong to make sure I would to avoid such a state. Most of all, whatever might happen, I felt sure I could handle it myself.

I may not have been quite like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, but I certainly could name for you all the good things that I have done to avoid being a source of pity or misfortune or disrespect.

Up until that time, I never knew what it meant to be truly dependent on others. I knew how to handle things in my life, in my relationships and in my body.

How quickly things change. As I laid in the hospital bed, I marveled how my fate rested in so many strangers.

It turned out my South African heart surgeon had a sense of humor. As we were deciding whether to have the surgery as an emergency on a Sunday afternoon or wait until Monday, I asked him how he was feeling. Was he up for open heart surgery on a Sunday afternoon? He responded, oh fine, he had a few...but felt ok!?!

This experience stripped me of all the things I had accumulated over the years; the degrees, the honors the reputation. None of that mattered to the people who cared for me. I was not Reverend or mom or Mrs., I was someone who was broken and needed fixing. They did not judge me for my intellect or politics, but saw the potential to make what was wrong right.

Later that night following the surgery, the ICU nurse thought I might be having a stroke, so they called the stroke team in. Before they did, they warned me that things would get a little crazy. Well, they did. It was like a Chinese fire drill. People moving around me in all directions. I think I was handling it all pretty well; keeping it all together until I saw a very tall African American man dressed in a dark suit standing at the foot of my bed. He introduced himself as the chaplain.

Great, this is worse than I thought! They brought the chaplain in! I did an inventory and thought, my relationship with God is pretty

good last I checked. After all, I am in the business, too. I did not know if he thought the same way I did on theological matters and doctrine, whether he was an infant baptizer or an adult baptizer. None of that mattered. As the medical folks were swirling around, I asked him to pray. I have no recollection of what he said, but I did know that I could not handle this all by myself. I needed him to pray with me. He took my hand. His presence was like a life preserver in the middle of a storm. The power of people of faith calling upon God has no equal!

We go through life equipping ourselves to protect ourselves from the storms. All the time, we apply layers to make ourselves presentable to others. Over the years, what we present to others is far different than who we are on the inside. Each morning, we fix ourselves to be presentable to the world. We create through our study and careers our attitudes and our options of how others see us. There are moments when we can no longer keep up the facade. We can no longer present what we have carefully crafted for others to see.

Jesus teaches us that what we present on the outside needs to coexist with who we are on the inside. In this parable, Jesus contrasts what we want others to see to what is behind the veneer. Jesus wants us to get to the heart of the matter. Jesus introduces this parable, telling who the audience is: “To some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, in comparison and to the contempt of others.”

This Pharisee is doing all the right things. He studies the laws of Moses; he fasts, he gives. The outside presentation is intact. He is so sure of himself that he builds himself up even further on the back of other’s failings.

This Pharisee does not need God, he has made things right all by himself. Jesus turns his attention from him to the one who is the

subject of contempt, the tax collector. The tax collector cannot hide behind the curtain of respectability. All has been stripped from him. The tax collector comes before God as he is, a sinner.

If we were the observers and Jesus asked us, who does God want to wrap God's encompassing arms around? It is the good church leader, the one who fasts and pledges, and does all the things that are expected. Of course, he would be the one we need to emulate. Jesus is looking on the inside and the Pharisee cannot get beyond what the outside looks like. Jesus points to the tax collector, the one who knows that he can't rely on himself alone and, if he does, he knows he will be a hot mess. Jesus is looking at the one who relies on God's grace and mercy. Jesus points to the one who knows he needs fixing, knows that he is broken; the one who seeks God. God hears and heals us in our broken pieces.

A couple days following the surgeries, I was helped to the bathroom by the nurses' aide. She was the lowest of the nursing pecking order. I passed the mirror and stopped, horrified. What I saw in my reflection was not pretty. I audibly sighed and was close to tears. In broken English, the aid looked me in the eyes and responded, "Oh no! To us you are beautiful."

I think that at that moment she was an angel sent from God. I believe that God sees us in our stripped down, in our broken, sinful ugliness. God sees what we try to disparately hide. God says, oh no, to us you are beautiful.

Today, think about those dark places of our heart. The places where words of shame and guilt and unspoken remorse are tightly held. Those places not shared with anyone for fear they will no longer think highly of us. God knows those places, and God loves us still.

In so many ways, God turns us inside out. What we value as important, what we hold onto so very tightly, is not always what matters. What we dismiss as not worth mentioning has a way of being the very nugget of truth.

We are a broken people. As much as we want to dismiss our failures, or put a better spin on them, we need God in our lives because we cannot manage it all. The good news; the good news is that God takes our hand and proclaims us beautiful, and no one, no one, can take that from us.

I am so grateful that my story or my life did not end six years ago. Thanks to outstanding medical care, and many, many prayers I can be here today, sharing my story. I stand with each of you today knowing, knowing in my heart, that we are beloved children of God. And that is the story that each of us can live and tell. Nothing, nothing at all, can take that from us. Thanks be to God. Amen.