

Welcome, Announcements, and Land Acknowledgement

*We recognize that the land where we gather for worship belongs to God, as does all of creation, and that the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – have lived on this land since before settlers of European descent claimed ownership and displaced those for whom it was home. As we pursue our goals to dismantle racism and attend to growing diversity, we lament this injustice in our history and commit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighborhood.*

➤ *O let the power fall on me*

Call to Worship

God's spirit is poured out on all people.

**We shall prophesy and dream and see visions.**

Everyone who calls on God's name will be saved.

**God's spirit is poured out on all people.**

Let us worship God! Let us sing our praise...

➤ *Praise, I will praise*

420

Gathering Prayer / The Lord's Prayer / Words of Hope

Empty us, O God, of all that would keep us from being present in this time of worship. Pour out upon us your spirit of patience and humility that we might receive what you have to give us today. Fill us with your love, your compassion, and your grace, that we might know you in those around us.

There are many things that can separate us from you, O God, and many things that can separate us from one another. We think of walls, attitudes, languages, misunderstandings, prejudice, guilt, shame, fear, and mistrust.

We confess in the silence of our hearts these and other things that keep us from you, O God, and that keep us from one another...

Forgive us, Holy God, tear away the obstacles, destroy the barriers, and allow us to receive your renewing grace in the name of Jesus the Christ who encourages us to pray together... ***Our Father, who art in heaven – hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen***

God draws us into the web of all things. We discover that we are not trapped – we are connected and at peace with God's creation. Know that your sins are forgiven and give thanks. Amen

† Prayer for Understanding

**God of truth, may we know the truth about ourselves and about your great love for the world. Remind us always that we are not alone for we are sustained by your grace. Open your word of truth to each one of us today. Amen**

Scripture    **Joel 2: 23-32**    **[OT 848]**

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

**2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18**    **[NT 213]**

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. 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 that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

**Luke 18: 9-14**    **[NT 81]**

He 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. **Thanks be to God.**

### **Message**     **God's Mercy in a Graceful Web**

Think back for a moment to the beginning – to Genesis and the Garden of Eden. The first command given to humankind is recorded here: *"...of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."* The command is not, *"don't eat of the tree of knowledge"* as it is often misquoted. God wants us to have knowledge – God is in favour of that. Several years ago, our son Ian told me that homework was a direct result of the failure of Adam and Eve to follow God's command in the Garden of Eden. His logic went something like this: When they ate from the tree of knowledge, they discovered how much they didn't know. To remedy that they invented school to develop and share knowledge and school led to homework. I'm pretty sure this is not exactly what God had in mind! God doesn't say, *"Don't eat of the tree of knowledge."*

Similarly, God does not say, *"Don't eat of the tree of good and evil."* God knows that good and evil are part of our life experience; part of the real world in which we live, part of the freedom, which God gives to us. What God commands is that we do not eat of ***the tree of the knowledge of good and evil***. By putting these two concepts together, we realize that the command is meant to keep us from taking the knowledge of good and evil into ourselves. God knows what is good in the world and what is good for us – God knows what is evil. Put in the affirmative, it is a command to trust God – to rely on God's mercy.

When we eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil we are tempted to rely on ourselves. We are tempted to believe that we can know what is good for us. We are tempted to judge what is evil for others. We are tempted to take the trust that we are commanded to place in God and shift it to our own shoulders. The parable from Luke's gospel addresses this temptation. At the very beginning of the reading Luke tells us who the story is for: *He told this parable to some who **trusted in themselves** that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*

Sometimes we miss the opening lines of the readings because they are so familiar to us. We might even read the headings that have been added to our Bibles and therefore we hear that this is *The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector*. The problem with this is that we then fail to hear that this is a parable for ***some who trusted in themselves***. We jump right into the

stereotypes of Pharisee and tax collector – skipping over the part of the story that convicts us before we even enter the scene.

We are the ones who trust in ourselves. We are the ones who are the main characters in this parable. We are the ones who are tempted to rely on our own knowledge, our own skill, and our own goodness. We are the ones who trust in our own righteousness. We are the ones who are tempted to rely on our own knowledge of what is evil and to regard others with contempt.

Jesus reminds us that the first command is that we put our trust in God and in God's mercy.

Perhaps there are certain words and phrases that catch your attention as you read this passage. I noted that the Pharisee prayed by himself, **with himself**, is how some translations word it. This person does not seem to be approaching prayer as relationship with God – does not seem to be in conversation with God, but is talking to himself – making a list of his accomplishments – exalting himself. The Pharisee puts himself first – relies on his own judgment of good and evil – trusts in himself.

The tax collector, by contrast, is humble before God in prayer. In the children's story, *Charlotte's Web*, there is a spider trying to save the life of her friend Wilbur. Wilbur is a pig destined to become pork chops and bacon unless Charlotte can convince the people that he is something special. She writes messages in her web above the pigpen where Wilbur lives – messages that seek to identify Wilbur as an extraordinary being. She is looking for words to put in the web and Templeton, the rat who also lives in the barn, brings a piece of paper with the word, **humble**. Charlotte defines the word as *not proud and close to the ground*. The tax collector is not proud – he is not pleased and satisfied with his accomplishments, he is not arrogant about his personal worth and abilities. In fact, he keeps himself close to the ground – stays far from the pinnacle of the temple and keeps his eyes downcast. The tax collector puts himself at the mercy of God – relies on God's judgment – trusts in God.

Jesus tells this parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. When we hear the parable, we know who is righteous and we know who is worthy of contempt. The Pharisee is a religious person – he does all the things that a God-fearing, churchgoer should do – he is honest and respectful of others, he is loyal and faithful, he practices regular spiritual discipline and exercises responsible stewardship. These are the things many of us aspire to – the things many of us are encouraged to do as devoted church members.

We know that the Pharisee is righteous as clearly as we know that the tax collector is to be regarded with contempt. He collaborates with the oppressive Roman government to take money from those who can least afford it. He supports a system that keeps some people rich and some people poor. He takes advantage of the system for his own personal gain. He is not who we want to be – not someone to admire or emulate – perhaps not even someone we would encourage to participate in our community of faith.

The Pharisee is to be congratulated. Without people like him, society would flounder. His success, righteousness, and civic duty ensure the proper functioning of the social order. The problem is his attitude. He trusts in his own righteousness and his self-congratulatory righteousness becomes a barrier between him and other people – a barrier between him and God. The Pharisee is a good person, but his goodness prevents him from experiencing the interconnectedness of life. He can claim “I did this on my own,” “I’m a job creator,” or “I’m a successful businessman,” but what is lacking is his realization that his success is the product of the efforts of others as well as his own. This attitude of independence – of moral superiority – can infect nations as well as individuals.

In contrast, the tax collector recognizes that he is an outsider and that despite his financial well-being, he doesn’t belong in polite society. He is certain as he looks at his life that “I’m not ok.” He’s standing in the need of prayer and only the grace of God can restore him to wholeness. His prayer for mercy is not an admission of his unworthiness but of his imperfection. *“I’m not ok and you’re not ok. But that’s ok!”* Recognizing our need for grace – our complete dependence on God and the efforts of others – inspires us to claim our role as part of a world of interdependence – agents of healing and transformation, where fallibility doesn’t disqualify us from vocation or meaning.

The Pharisee’s mistake was his failure to confess his common humanity. We are all in this together. Our mortality levels the playing field and so does our need for others. Even our ethical goodness is tenuous: good people go astray and fall off the path. “I am not like those sinners over there,” the Pharisee judges, full of his own goodness. But – in reality – he is like them. Caught up in the web of relatedness, our goodness depends on factors outside ourselves and not just our respectability. We are all standing in the need of prayer – we all need to trust in God’s mercy.

Jesus presents these extremes, not to encourage us to become tax collectors, but to help us see the limitations of being the Pharisee. He presents these caricatures at polar opposites to remind us that our behaviour cannot save us – that our religious zeal will get us nowhere if we are trusting in ourselves. He presents these plastic portraits to persuade us to stop eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – to instead rely on God as the source and ground of all that we are and all that we are becoming.

*God have mercy!* This is the beginning and end of the spiritual journey. The tax collector’s prayer alerts us to the dynamic interdependence of life. There are no self-made persons. No one can make it on her or his own. Our righteousness is not fully the result of our own efforts but is part of the graceful interdependence of life.

Whether Pharisee or tax collector, may we always be those who see ourselves as fallible and fabulous – entangled in a marvelous web of creation – those who put our trust in God’s mercy. **Amen**

➤ *Rain down*

### † Offering Invitation

Sometimes we think what we have to offer doesn't matter. Somebody else has more to share. But God knows the value of a few loaves and fishes shared, a lost coin claimed, one tiny seed planted from which a tree grows. Trust God with what you have to offer and see what God can do.

➤ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

306

### † Offering Prayer

**Good and generous God, receive our humble gifts, offered in hope and gratitude. Make something of them – and of us, so that the world will be surprised by your love and what we can offer in Jesus' name. Amen**

### † Pastoral Prayers

Just and merciful God, we lift our eyes to you in hope and gratitude. When the world around us seems troubling, we are grateful for your steadfast love. Thank you for your Spirit at work in all times and places, calling out the best in your people, showing us when we must repent, opening paths to reconciliation where we have offended. With the humility of the tax collector in Jesus' story, may we seek your justice and know your mercy.

We pray for justice for the earth – protect those creatures and habitats that our way of life threatens – protect those communities and island nations at risk from climate change. Open our eyes to see how we can live more responsibly and change our hearts to know we must.

We pray for justice among the nations – create more generous sharing of resources between countries with good harvests and those depleted by famine. Where resources are extracted for export, protect brave advocates for fair wages and environmental protection. And where there is aggression and intimidation between nations, raise up the willingness to make peace and settle differences fairly.

We pray for justice in our court systems – guide those who judge and defend to serve with integrity, that those who are accused may receive fair trials, and that those who have been wronged or harmed are restored to fullness of life. Grant those who are convicted humane treatment so that your Spirit may lead them to rehabilitated potential.

We pray for justice in the workplace – may those who work for others be treated with dignity and earn a fair wage. May all who create that work earn a fair return. Create equity and respect between those of different backgrounds and identities and guide young people to opportunities that develop their gifts.

Holy God, we all need some kind of healing in our lives – we remember before you those struggling with illness of body, mind or spirit, those waiting for diagnosis or treatment, and all whose health challenges are invisible to others...

Your Spirit prays within us, O God, even when we cannot find the right words so hear us this day and answer us in ways that encourage our faith and change the world for the good. We pray in Jesus' name. **Amen**

➤ *In loving partnership*

759

### Blessing

The mercy of God is poured out on you. Go and serve Jesus, knowing that God is with you always to guide and sustain you. And may the grace of the risen Christ, the wisdom of God and the nurturing community of the Holy Spirit embrace us all. Amen

➤ *May the God of hope go with us every day*

726

