

A Song and a Prayer

Psalm 84: 1-7; Luke 18: 9-14

Rev. Erica Avena

March 22, 2020

Prayer: Stand by us gracious God, and strengthen us to hear and to proclaim your message in the testimony of our lives. Grant us humility to see ourselves in perspective, larger than our self-concern. Let us hear the words of correction, as surely as we hear the words of hope. Remold us according to your purpose, and sustain us when we struggle with temptation...

Inadvertently, I have found myself repeating Amie's sermon title from two weeks ago, "wait...what?" over and over in the last couple of weeks, as I've sought to get my mind around the next level of Coronavirus 19 closings and restrictions.

- Wait...what? We're closing the Academy for two weeks?
- Wait...what? We're closing the building and practicing social distancing?
- Wait...what? The staff and I need to make our ministries available on-line?
- Wait...what? All three of my kids are home from school...indefinitely?
- Wait...what happened with the stock market?

Amie was preaching on the parable of the *Laborers in the Vineyard* who worked different hours but were paid the same wage. Which isn't fair at all...but in this time of Coronavirus, looks like a model of good policy — when some people are being laid off and others are profiting, when some are suffering and others are well, when some workers may work from home and people who string together two or three part-time jobs suddenly have no hours at all — the same reward for different circumstances looks like a pretty good plan. What we all want is for everyone to live through this, grandparents, immune compromised, distant cousins, hospital staff, and our nearest and dearest beloveds.

So it has come to this, "wait... what?" I am in _____ by myself, preaching to people I have only just begun to know. Wondering where you are and how my words will fall when you are listening. I've never done this before...

Our series on the parables gives us a lens to consider our world. The parables are stories that Jesus made up, to illustrate a larger moral teaching.

- Faith is like a mustard seed. It is like yeast in bread dough — faith grows.
- Faith is like a good Samaritan who walked along the road and found a man who had been beaten and robbed, while others, the very people who you think might help, just passed by. The good Samaritan has a new face today, perhaps different from what you might have imagined just a few weeks ago.

Parables invite us to use our imagination, remember what you know and have seen in your own life. Jesus is holding up these stories, so we can consider our lives in their light. Jesus was all about healing the sick, concern for the poor, and challenging the authorities and powers of his day. Jesus was all about reversals of power, circumstances and fortune — reversals reveal faith.

Jesus is using a cast of stock characters in today's parable: The Pharisee, who in his day was seen to be: law abiding, helpful, and generous to the popular charities...you know, the fancy ones where everyone congratulates one another on their generosity (I'm not naming anyone.) The Pharisee says in his prayer: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector..." Meanwhile, the tax collector (and in Jesus' day, to be a tax collector is to be involved in a shady business area – collecting taxes for Rome, in a system that was rife with abuse and corruption) ...this tax collector stands in prayer, repenting... He isn't thinking about the Pharisee. He isn't wishing to be like the Pharisee. He is focused on what he knows he has been involved in, which is more than enough for him.

Jesus knew hypocrites. Jesus debated in the Temple with the best of them. He knew them, he knew their minds, and how they lived. And he knew, that once you've spent enough time repenting of your sins, cleaning up your act, seeking to live a moral life, it is easy to begin trusting in your own amazing accomplishments — to forget what you were like before you knew better, to forget God's gracious love poured out for all. It's easy to be thankful that you are not like other people, you don't have their problems, and you may feel that you have earned it. Jesus has no patience for this point of view.

Jesus laid down his life for his friends.

I've been thinking about hypocrisy and how to talk about it. Especially with so many fortunes being reversed right now. Pointing out that someone else is a hypocrite is, in itself, a hypocritical thing to do. So you have to be careful how you bring it up. Hypocrisy is revealed in circumstances — it is there, in actions, available to be noticed.

Jesus used this parable, it's a framework or lens to use, he doesn't need to name names. Although he could.

At a previous church there were some folk who would come up to me after worship and say, "I know your message was just perfect for certain members of the choir (nudge, nudge, wink, wink) or Jose in the front – that pretty much nailed him – or Juniper who doesn't have a thought in her head...but that really did apply to her..." This response happened...quite a lot, actually. And what does one say to such comments? "Oh...really...okay then...."

But there was one, shall I say, church elder, a “seasoned” woman who had known these people for some time. She would take my hand at the end of the service and say in a loud voice, loud enough to be overheard... “thank you for your words, Pastor. There was a great deal to apply to my own life. I will pray about this, and seek to change my ways, this week.”

- At first of course, I thought... “wow, that sermon must have been better than I thought...!” This went on week after week, and I began to wonder ... how much can one nice old lady genuinely repent of. (Well dressed, honest working people, active volunteers...)
- Finally, I caught on to what she was doing. She was seeking to model good prayer habits, and to change some of the judgmental culture in the room around her. Everyone else thought the sermons were directed at other people. Without going after anyone directly, she was providing a model of how a person would react without judgment. “Thank you for your words, I will apply them to my own life.” And she did. She was a remarkable woman, aging gracefully, living a vibrant life, turning over the gospel’s challenges each week with personal courage, imagination, and faith.

There in a congregation like any other, mixed with saints and sinners...

This is a personal parable. Maybe since we are by ourselves, it might be easier to apply it personally... It is a simple prayer, to say with the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

The world which thrives on intimidation and corruption, wants you to believe that you don’t have a prayer.

But we do, we do have a prayer. We have a prayer because God has invited us to sit down and rest ourselves at the welcome table... it has always been for us born in the time we are, a virtual welcome. We are separated from Jesus by time. Yet the invitation has been standing since he first gave voice to it.

In this season, you and I and many whom we love, are separated by various iterations of social distance. This is a time to come together in prayer for and with one another. So important to look out for your loved ones, rest yourselves, eat well, exercise, do the things you need to do to support your own health and well-being.

I’m grateful to the musicians who are providing music for this service, music is a great vehicle for prayer for many of us. Perhaps you have seen the images of the Italians on their balconies singing together, each isolated in their homes, yet joining their voices with joy while loved ones are sick and the pandemic is in their midst.

We are not together, but we can sing together; we can pray together, we may be distanced, but we are in this together — in very important ways.

The day is coming when we will be restored to one another.

©Rev. Erica Avena 03.22.2020

First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107