

Jeremiah 14

14 The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought:

² Judah mourns

and her gates languish;
they lie in gloom on the ground,
and the cry of Jerusalem goes up.

³ Her nobles send their servants for water;

they come to the cisterns,
they find no water,
they return with their vessels empty.

They are ashamed and dismayed
and cover their heads,

⁴ because the ground is cracked.

Because there has been no rain on the land
the farmers are dismayed;
they cover their heads.

⁵ Even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn
because there is no grass.

⁶ The wild asses stand on the bare heights,^[a]

they pant for air like jackals;
their eyes fail
because there is no herbage.

⁷ Although our iniquities testify against us,

act, O LORD, for your name's sake;
our apostasies indeed are many,
and we have sinned against you.

⁸ O hope of Israel,

its savior in time of trouble,
why should you be like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler turning aside for the night?

⁹ Why should you be like someone confused,
like a mighty warrior who cannot give help?

Yet you, O LORD, are in the midst of us,
and we are called by your name;
do not forsake us!

¹⁰ Thus says the LORD concerning this people:

Truly they have loved to wander,
they have not restrained their feet;
therefore the LORD does not accept them,
now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins.

¹¹ The LORD said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people. ¹² Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I do not accept them; but by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence I consume them.

¹³ Then I said: “Ah, Lord GOD! Here are the prophets saying to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place.’” ¹⁴ And the LORD said to me: The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. ¹⁵ Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name though I did not send them, and who say, “Sword and famine shall not come on this land”: By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed.

¹⁶ And the people to whom they prophesy shall be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword. There shall be no one to bury them—themselves, their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out their wickedness upon them.

¹⁷ You shall say to them this word:

Let my eyes run down with tears night and day,
and let them not cease,
for the virgin daughter—my people—is struck down with a crushing blow,
with a very grievous wound.

¹⁸ If I go out into the field,
look—those killed by the sword!

And if I enter the city,
look—those sick with^[b] famine!

For both prophet and priest ply their trade throughout the land,
and have no knowledge

¹⁹ Have you completely rejected Judah?

Does your heart loathe Zion?

Why have you struck us down

so that there is no healing for us?

We look for peace, but find no good;

for a time of healing, but there is terror instead.

²⁰ We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD,

the iniquity of our ancestors,

for we have sinned against you.

²¹ Do not spurn us, for your name’s sake;

do not dishonor your glorious throne;

remember and do not break your covenant with us.

²² Can any idols of the nations bring rain?

Or can the heavens give showers?

Is it not you, O LORD our God?

We set our hope on you,

for it is you who do all this.

Luke 18:9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ 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!’ ¹⁴ 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.”

Prayer –

Those who humble themselves will be exalted

And those who exalt themselves will be humbled

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The Sinner That You Are

Jeremiah 14:1-22; Luke 18:9-14

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Confession. Do we recognize an authentic confession when we hear one? Do we know how to say that we are sorry and mean it? It's a tough lesson to teach to our children or grandchildren, let alone to teach to adults. I find myself cajoling half-hearted apologies out of my offspring when they have picked on each other more than I can stand. I know what it's like to be in an argument with my spouse and want to be right rather than be the one who is apologetic. Anyone who hasn't successfully hidden under a rock from this election cycle knows that the mean-spirited language of our presidential campaign has led to multiple apologies that haven't seemed particularly remorseful, at least not to me. I dare say that we know EXACTLY what Jesus is talking about when he compares the prayers of the tax collector to the prayers of the Pharisee.

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that there are confessions that are deeply heart-felt pleadings with God, and there are confessions that are little more than badly-veiled false humility. In this life lesson, Luke even is gracious enough to give us a preamble to let us know who the audience is for this story. The gospel tells us that Jesus is talking to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and who regarded others with contempt." Oh boy! How quickly we would like to deflect this one as about "them" and not about "us," and yet, the very second that we do, we've just put ourselves into the category as the ones for whom this story has been recorded – the righteous who are more than ready to make judgments of others.

I hate it when that happens, and it happens often when we go looking in scripture for confirmation of our own virtue in comparison to the vices of others. We start thanking God that we are not like other people. Thank God I am not like the thieves, the rogues, the adulterers, and most certainly not like that tax collector over there. The stakes get higher and higher when we start comparing fault to fault, crime to crime, sin to sin. To claim to be unstained in life or by life is to wander afield from the truth. And yet how often have we found ways of making ourselves feel better about our own tarnished moments by trying to claim that at least they aren't quite as bad as someone else's sin?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, and anti-Nazi dissident, a man who was well acquainted with evil in the world, wrote that, for this reason, the truth of the gospel is difficult for the pious to understand. Those who see themselves as fully righteous miss the point. And the point Bonhoeffer and preachers following him are inclined to take from the gospel, and from passages such as this, is to remember that, "You are a sinner, a great, desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you."

We don't have to be sin-free for God to love us. And Jesus makes it clear that we shouldn't be so quick to minimize our own sin without having taken a fairly long walk in the tax collector's shoes. It is a pretty pathetic kind of prayer to be thanking God that we aren't as horrible as other people. And yet, the Pharisees were inclined to make that kind of prayer publicly and often. Jesus got fed up with their religiosity. He couldn't stomach their contempt for those who were not as religiously uptight about following the rules as they were. Sadly, religion tends to make us think that is the point, to make ourselves "good enough" for God. It is in the best interest of institutions to always have us jumping through hoops – so the system teaches us that we have to do all the right things in order for God to love us. It helps that many of

those “right things” are things like being tithing, participating, socially acceptable members of a church community.

But instead, this lie of religion is the very one that Jesus seems to spend a lot of his time trying to correct, so much so that the Pharisees are one of the groups itching to do him in. Jesus reminds us that it is not the strict nature of the morality police who will lead us closer to God. It’s not the church membership that will afford us a ticket to heaven. The truth of the gospel is this: God loves us. God has always loved us. There’s nothing we can do to make God stop loving us. Really, nothing. Religion has taught us that God will love us IF we change. Thus, the Pharisee’s prayer. But the truth is God’s love changes us – as evidenced by the tax collector’s prayer.

Confession. The tax collector’s prayer is enough. It has always been enough for God. There are times in scripture, today’s reading from Jeremiah for example, that remind us that there have been times when folks have felt like God was punishing them, like God was wringing them out on account of their sins – causing droughts and famines and oppression from foreign regimes. When we know, really know the level of our own iniquity, the world can feel like a punishing kind of place where God has left us out on our own. A contemporary Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us that God is not punishing us FOR our sins, but it can certainly feel like we are being punished BY our sins. That’s precisely when it is important to remember God, and God’s steadfast faithfulness and love. We are not earning our rewards in heaven. We are simply claiming them because God loved us first.

The assumption in Jesus’ parable is that the tax collector would automatically be known as more sinful than the Pharisee. They were known as cheats and liars who fully represented the cheating and lying of an unjust government. Greedy, unscrupulous types who took advantage of

their own people for personal gain. How could that person's prayer be understood in ANY way as worthy of God's attention, and yet it was, simply because the tax collector knew the depth of his own sin and was sorry for it. We don't even know if he did something differently or better the next day or if he was stuck in his own bad habits and transgressions. But for that moment. He was mending his relationship with the God who loved him anyway.

The list rattled off by the Pharisee is certainly a familiar one. We want to be better than the thieves, cheats, and liars. We want to be above the adulterers and all those tempted by the desires of the flesh. We want to separate ourselves from the criminals, and claim justice and fairness in all our own financial dealings. And here we are, the same, the very same when we stand naked and ashamed before God our maker who knows us to the very heart of things.

At times, in my own pastoral interpretations of God's astounding graciousness, I have been accused of being too soft on sin, too forgiving, too mushy in my boundaries of who's in and who's out of God's kingdom. But what I know in my heart is this, if I can know that God loves me, a desperate sinner, more the tax collector type with no good excuses and no one else to blame, then who am I to say who God will refuse to love? That would be foolish. Our holy book is way too full of the examples of God's loving-kindness for me to be fooled by any lie that would perpetuate the religiosity of Christianity over the tremendous love of Christ. Amen.