

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, 24 October 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Today's Psalm is a wonderful collection of images clustered around being in God's household. It is one of those portions of the Psalter that invites one to embroider it on a sampler or write it in lovely calligraphy, so that it can hang on the wall for daily inspiration

It begins with an expression of deep love for the Temple (God's dwelling place) and joy in God's presence, which is represented in the memorable image of the sparrow and the swallow, small fragile birds, nesting there. It goes on to talk about the joy of living with God, a life filled with praise. Then it expands the picture, proclaiming the happiness of those who have God for their strength, who follow the lifelong path of pilgrimage, saying that these people will find refreshment even in the worst experiences, rising above them as God gloriously reveals himself to them.

It is interesting to juxtapose this Psalm with the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (in older, more euphonious language, the Pharisee and the Publican). Both men are in the Temple, God's dwelling place, to worship. The Pharisee is like the swallow or the sparrow, having found a comfortable, safe place for himself in God's inner circle. But he has not gone further. He has stopped there, stuck in the Temple, satisfied with his own personal safety. He is very pleased with himself and even goes so far as to pity anyone who is not just like him. He is filled with scorn for sinners of all sorts, for everyone who falls short of his perfect presence in God's holy temple. He is stuck.

The Tax Collector leads a less worthy life in terms of rules and observances, but he is much more aware.

The Pharisee went into God's house and saw nothing beyond a perfect home for himself. The Tax Collector saw God – and seeing God, recognized his own unworthiness. He did not run away; he did not hide. He stayed and acknowledged his own limitations. He is the one whose foot is set on the pilgrim's way, the one who is working his way through life seeking God. He is the one who finds the refreshment after the terrible experiences of loss and fear. He is the one who will see God rising to reveal himself, because he is not blinded by self-satisfaction; he is not drawn in to himself.

God offers refuge to everyone, but an essential part of finding that refuge is recognizing that it is not because we are clever or scrupulous or in any way worthy. Recognizing our unworthiness opens our eyes to God's infinite generosity and opens our hearts to others. The

Pharisee is so stuck in his own nest, focused on his own worth, that he has no regard for anyone else.

In *Journey with Jesus* this week, Daniel Clendenin says, “I’ve always loved the tender wisdom of St. Maximos the Confessor (seventh century): ‘The person who has come to know the weakness of human nature has gained experience of divine power. Such a person never belittles anyone...He knows that God is like a good and loving physician who heals with individual treatment each of those who are trying to make progress.’” The Pharisee lacks this experience and wisdom.

It took courage for the Tax Collector to bring his offering and his prayer to the Temple, but presenting himself there to the boundless love of God frees him to follow God anywhere, with confidence in God’s forgiving, healing love.

The Parable invites each of us to ask ourselves: Do we try to be the lone safe sparrow, like the Pharisee, following all the rules, staying in the safest place, with only the good people? Or do we have the courage to be like the Tax Collector, bringing God our whole selves, with every bit of unworthiness, and then following God out in service among whatever sorts of people God place in our paths.

The parable invites us to live like the Tax Collector, fully aware of our shortcomings and fully aware of God’s forgiveness, because the best news is that God’s love embraces the penitent Tax Collector – and the self-righteous Pharisee.

As a parish whose patron Saint James, one of the major saints of pilgrimage, we think a lot about pilgrims and pilgrimage, about life as a journey toward God. In our individual pilgrimages we may at times be more like the Pharisee or the sparrow, focused on our own quest of perfect rest, and at others more like the Tax Collector, recognizing our need to be forgiven, to grow and change and move farther along the journey. The key awareness we gain from the Tax Collector is that God loves us just the same.

God’s hospitality is infinite, welcoming everyone. And so should ours be, since we are made in the image of God. The parable and Psalm put me in mind of this. In Jesus’ story, both the respected (and self-righteous) Pharisee and the social outcast Tax Collector were able to be in the Temple, bringing their offerings, raising up their prayers.

We need to be always checking ourselves against this picture. Do we offer a place where people of whatever sort, wherever they are on their life’s journey, can find welcome? That should always be our goal. That is true hospitality.

And to my mind true hospitality is true stewardship. The word stewardship refers to caring for things responsibly, specifically caring for things on behalf of someone else. “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” We acknowledge that God is the source of everything, of all life, of all that is. There is nothing that is not God’s. But we are not called to simply give it back. We are called to steward those things with which we have been entrusted – our money, our families, our friends, our church, our community, the land ...

Stewarding means caring for things in a way that both preserves them and makes them grow, that helps them be fit for their appropriate uses. God’s purpose in all things is love, is welcome for everyone. Therefore, true hospitality is true stewardship, it is using all that God has given us to reach out and provide that welcoming, nurturing, growing experience for everyone we can reach.

Today’s saint of the week reminded me of a wonderful example of that kind of stewardship and hospitality.

Our saint of the week is John Wycliffe, a priest who lived in fourteenth century England, in the years when the church was filled with a restlessness that blossomed into the Reformation not long after. Wycliffe was involved in many struggles and efforts to eliminate abuses of various sorts within the church and the royal court. Some of his ideas would still sound radical today, but at the heart of his passion was the idea that we are all unworthy like the Tax Collector, and that we should all be able to bring our broken penitent hearts directly into God’s dwelling.

Himself highly educated, but disillusioned, Wycliffe gathered a band of devout preachers without formal training (called the Lollards) and sent them out to preach the Gospel based on English language translations of scripture that he was instrumental in creating. Preaching and teaching so that everyone could understand for themselves was critical to him.

Inspired by his example of translating God’s word into the language of the people, Wycliffe Bible Translators was established during the Second World War. Their vision is simple and profound: “God’s word accessible to all people in the language of their heart.” – a simple beautiful, profoundly hospitable vision.

The Wycliffe translators have created more than 700 translations of the Bible. Obviously all of the languages of major populations have long existed, so these dedicated translators work to provide translations into the languages of smaller groups. Wycliffe does not simply translate the text, but also works to develop community resources and promote literacy, especially in isolated populations.

When I was in graduate school at Stanford, a friend in our Bible study became inspired by their vision. My friend was a PhD student in geology and now he is a prominent seismologist at CalTech. But for several years, he worked in a village in the Amazon. His work is typical of the extraordinary hospitality of the Wycliffe translators. He and his partner lived in this tiny village, learning the local language, developing a writing system to be able to transcribe it, then working on ways to translate scripture into that language into that tongue so that people could understand. The Bible mentions snow. These villagers had no word for snow and no experience of snow, so creativity was essential.

Work in the village involved teaching the Gospel, the true gift of hospitality that invites people into God's family, and it involved teaching people to read and write so that their culture could develop and they could learn what they needed to survive in the face of the encroachment of surrounding cultures, and it involved learning about all that they loved and knew from their centuries of life in their particular part of God's creation.

This kind of self-offering to meet the needs of others and to welcome them into God's household is true hospitality. Using all of their education and intelligence in this work of service, and enabling the survival of a people and a culture is true stewardship.

I hope that as we think about how we will respond to God's call to us during this stewardship season, we will think about the gifts we have to give and to share, the ways in which our stewardship of this building and this community can truly further our expression of God's loving welcome to all people, Pharisees and Tax Collectors, Amazonians and Pasadena Seismologists. Amen.