

We Want You
October 27, 2019
Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



“Jesus spoke this parable addressed to those who believed in their own self-righteousness while holding everyone else in contempt. “Two people went up to the Temple to pray; one was a religious leader, the other a tax collector. The religious leader stood and prayed like this: ‘I give thanks, O God, that I’m not like others – greedy, crooked, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn.’ The other one, however, kept at a distance, not even daring to look up to heaven. In real humility, all the tax collector said was, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’ Believe me, the tax collector went home from the Temple right with God, while the religious leader didn’t. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

-Luke 18.9-14 (the Inclusive Bible)

“Open wide the gates of heaven” this morning and give us mercy.

These days, I find myself often calling out to the universe for mercy. Mercy! When I watch the news. Mercy! For those moments when I’ve had enough and don’t feel like I can take it anymore. Mercy! When the truth of my own complicity in hatred and violence makes me despair of any hope for forgiveness and new beginnings.

Like the wise elder women of the South, I say: Mercy!

And there is a pattern in Luke about mercy.

There is that famous “Good Samaritan” story in Luke 10 in which a lawyer is trying to get a fix on what it means to love your neighbor as yourself and asks: “Who is my neighbor?” In the end, the lawyer has to admit that the neighbor is that unexpected person who offers mercy. In the story for today, it is the tax collector – complicit in all kinds of oppression and injustice – who cries out “Have mercy on me!” And that’s the one who receives mercy. An unexpected person recognizes the need for, and receives, mercy.

I don’t know how to feel about that. It’s disappointing and hopeful all at the same time.

It’s disappointing that the ones I expect or think I should count on for mercy – religious folk, good people, leaders who have sworn an oath to serve - are sometimes – maybe even often – the ones who are most unlikely to show it.

And it’s hopeful to think that there is that unexpected person who just might.

Last Sunday, Dr. Hunter briefly mentioned the story in Luke 21 about the poor widow in the Temple. Jesus is people watching. And he sees rich people putting their offerings in the Temple treasury. And then, maybe out of the corner of his eye, he sees an impoverished widow putting in two copper coins – “everything she had to live on” – into the offering plate. “The truth is,” Jesus says, “this woman has put in more than all the rest; the rich made contributions out of their surplus, but this woman from her poverty has given what she couldn’t afford.”

I think this continues Luke's pattern of unexpected people showing mercy.

I say that knowing how often this story has been misused. You may know faithful elderly people who gave money they could not afford to television preachers so those preachers could live in luxury.

At a previous church I served, there was a faithful and generous woman who, even as her financial situation continued to decline, kept making her annual pledge. I got a call one day from her daughter who said: "I know my mother loves the church and she loves you but I thought I should tell you that my mom is making her pledge payments on her credit card and she can't afford the interest on that card much less the principal."

I told her that I was so glad she let us know and that we loved her mom and would never want her to put herself in that kind of jeopardy. And we figured out a way to assure this great woman that she was a valued member of the community. And we put a stop to the payments.

And here's the thing. Here was this woman who had served in the military and in the school system and yet, in her later years, she had fewer and fewer resources to live on.

Which makes me want to point out that, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is standing firmly in the Jewish prophetic tradition. And, in that tradition, the test for a society's righteousness had to do with how they took care of two groups of people – orphans and widows.

I think Jesus is pointing out this widow, not simply as a tribute to her generosity, but as an indictment of that society. That she has given everything she has – which is not enough to live on – demonstrates how much that society has failed her.

Maybe the folks hearing this say: "Okay, Jesus, we should take better care of widows and orphans; we get it."

But it's more complicated than that. This is about unexpected people who demonstrate mercy. Those who might be seen as the object of some kind of compassion instead become examples of it: the "good" Samaritan, a tax collector, a poor widow.

I wonder what this recognition meant to her. As a woman in a culture with no husband, was she discounted? Was she made to feel worthless? Was she tempted to believe that she no longer had anything to offer? And was this giving an act of defiance, "Look, I'm not just the object of your broken system; I still have value; I still have something to give?"

Perhaps, in her poverty, she knew that all any of us really have to give is ourselves. The rich may think they can get away with giving something less than themselves by giving out of their surplus. But this wisdom teacher – this poor widow – let's us know that, if we are serious about something, all we really have to give is ourselves.

It's like that illustration Dr. Hunter used last week about one of Pastor Ned's times with children and the giant offering plate and the little girl who stepped into the middle of it. She knew.

One of the names we will call out next Sunday during the remembrance of those who have passed from us year, is Moselle Sims. She had been a member of this church for almost 78 years when she died on March 17.

Several years before, she had decided that word had to get out into the neighborhood about who we are at Seattle First Baptist Church. So she wrote an article for the Capitol Hill Times titled, "Just As I Am." *Seattle*, she wrote, *known for being "under-churched," is also (thankfully) known for the diverse paths its people take in the perennial quest for meaning. Such is the nature of my Seattle First Baptist Church. As*

one of the oldest welcoming and affirming churches in Seattle, it's lighted Spire has served as a landmark for the Capitol Hill community for over 100 years. Under that historic spire, a warm welcome awaits you ...

And then she quotes from a sermon on a previous Sunday:

Just as I am. Perhaps this is a promise you aren't sure you can trust – because of your past, your age or gender or orientation or the color of your skin or your resources or abilities or doubts or “fightings within or fears without” – you feel like you cannot come just as you are. But the truth is, that's all we really want – you. You are the gift, just as you are.”

There wasn't a mad rush of Capitol Hill-ites through these doors. But Moselle is right. What the people around us need to know is that this is a place where you could trust being who you are and that all we really want is you.

Now for those of you who find yourself wondering about this whole “just as you are” business when you are trying so hard to become a better you, I offer some words of wisdom from another wise woman.

Last summer I read Michelle Obama's autobiography. I promised myself I would not read this as a research study but simply read it as her story – no pen in hand, no underlining, no notes in the margins.

And I did pretty well until I got to the very last three sentences. And the pen came out. She ends her story saying:

There's power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. And there's grace in being willing to know and hear others. This, for me, is how we become.

Whatever it is you are striving to become, it starts first with coming just as you are and meeting others with that same grace.

Believe me, I know that the hymn “Just As I Am” has a sordid past – or at least it has been used in sordid ways. I have stories to tell. And probably some of you do too.

But you should know that there is an original story. It's the story from the 1800s about a young woman who was frustrated and angry about her debilitating poor health. As the story goes, a minister came calling on the family, and ...

Over dinner, Charlotte lost her temper and railed against God and family in a violent outburst. Her embarrassed family left the room, and the minister was left alone with her. “You are tired of yourself, aren't you?” he said. You are holding to your hate and anger because you have nothing else in the world to cling to ...”

“What is your cure?” Charlotte asked. “You should give yourself to God just as you are, with your fightings and fears, hates and loves, pride and shame.”

... come to God just as I am? Is that right? Charlotte asked.

Yes!

Years later, Charlotte's brother was raising funds for a school for the daughters of poor clergymen. [I suspect if poor clergymen had money to spend on their children's education, they spent it on their sons and not their daughters.] So ... Charlotte wrote a poem, and it was printed and sold across England. The leaflet [with the poem] said: “Sold for the Benefit of St. Margaret's Hall” and underneath was:

*Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears, within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

Just as I am, I come. Doubts and all. Conflicts and unresolved tensions and fears, I come.

In Charlotte's day, she was called an "invalid; an 'in-valid'." And she might have continued to wonder if she really did have any valid claim of value worth offering the world. But when she died in 1871, "her family discovered more than a thousand letters from people who wanted to thank her for writing "Just As I Am."

*Just as I am, you will receive,
Will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because your promise, I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

Perhaps this is a promise you aren't sure you can trust this morning. There are all kinds of messages and experiences and fears that make you wary. You have good reasons to resist.

But there are those unexpected people. And there is this promise of a mercy that welcomes and heals and frees. And there is this risk that could change your life.

So, today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts. Come just as you are because all we want – all the world needs – is you.

NOTES

Becoming, Michelle Obama (Crown, 2018). There are many stories about the life of Charlotte Elliot and "Just As I Am." What appears here is from *Then Sings My Soul*, Robert J. Morgan (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), p.113 and <http://conjubilant.blogspot.com/2010/03/charlotte-elliott.html>.