

How is it with your soul? *Honest Living*
by Pastor Leah Rosso
Psalm 119:97-104; Luke 18:9-14

So, how is it with your soul church? It's a complicated question, isn't it; with complicated answers. With how much I was gone this summer, I am just beginning to get caught up on how each of you is doing individually — and I'll probably never fully get caught up. But there's also a collective "how is it with our soul" — the soul of this community; the soul of the wider St. Cloud community; the soul of our nation; and our world. And that too is complicated because we all experience it differently, and yet the reason I like this question is because it takes into consideration the whole of who we are — that we are a body that lives in bodies; that we have different perspectives; that we feel things very differently. I'm not asking you this question apart from your body — we're not talking about the soul as an existential thing that exists apart from ourselves. I don't find that very useful or even very true. I'm asking it as I imagine John Wesley asked it, which is: how are you in relationship with your self; in relationship with your neighbors; and in relationship with God? How are you experiencing and then responding to God's grace in your life — which has everything to do with your body; your mind; your heart; your connections to the people in your lives, the stuff in your life, and to your God.

If we just look at the national news this past week; or last week; or the week before that; then I think we see fairly clearly that we are not doing well. That our souls — individually and collectively — are in pain.

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus tells us a parable — a story meant to help us see a greater truth. And it seems fairly simple. There are two men in the Temple — one that we know is doing all the things that bring God glory — praying, fasting, giving of his money, spending time in worship, all of the things. And then there is another man who, from his title as tax collector, we know is working for the Roman government to take away money from those who are poor and put it into the hands of those who are rich and most likely getting rich himself off doing so. In many ways Jesus is relying on his audience, and on us, to know the categories these men fall into — the faithful man being the one who we are supposed to be like; and the tax collector being the one that we know is cheating us. And then Jesus shares their prayers — how the religious leader knows that he is faithful and gives thanks that he is not like the tax collector; and how the tax collector, knowing his sin, begs for mercy. And then as they leave, we are told it is the tax collector who goes away justified — or in right relationship with God.

And the trap of the parable, is that it is so easy for all of us to instantly say to ourselves, without even realizing we're doing it, "Thank God I'm not like that religious leader!"

Lord have mercy. Even knowing the parable; even having heard it hundreds of times; my ego still falls into that trap *almost every time*.

Sometimes we think that because Jesus lived so long ago in a culture and place that is so different from my own, that he couldn't possibly know our troubles. And yet this parable lands squarely in the heart of our pain and dysfunction and hatred for one another that is palpable in our public sphere — Jesus is telling his disciples and us, in a fairly simple way, that it is contempt, the feeling that we are superior to someone else or in this case that we know God more than someone else, that will keep us from God and one another. It is contempt that erodes the soul.

Jesus is not trying in any way to demonize people who pray; or fast; or follow religious rules. Throughout the Gospel the people who are called righteous are those who are following God and are loved by God, and Jesus encourages his disciples to do all of the things that he points out that this religious leader is doing. What Jesus wants us to see in this short story, is that even something as wonderful as faithful living; even something as lifted up as *gratitude* can be used as a weapon— even in our prayer lives. That when we are not honest with ourselves, with God, and with one another the contempt that we allow to grow can gain deep roots quickly, causing continuous harm. The tax collector is lifted up not because of his lifestyle; not because he is going to change his ways; not because he is a model of who we should want to be; he is lifted up purely because he is honest with God and with himself— which is the only place we can begin.

Eric Barreto, a current theologian, says that when our actions of faithfulness lead us to anger, contempt, and resentment, we have misunderstood the shape of salvation. What is salvation? It's a loaded word in our culture today. But I want to remind us that it comes from the same root word as "salve" which means a balm to heal. When the things we do to be faithful to God lead us to contempt, we have misunderstood our own healing. The shape of our healing; the source of our healing; the way in which we, as a nation will find healing, is not through being right. It is not by growing contempt for our neighbors in our bodies and our minds. And we need to be willing to be honest about this. Because the stories we tell ourselves matter— they create the narrative we live in; they give us the framework for what we think is possible. And the stories being told this week are awful.

Yes, we as a nation are ambivalent- meaning we have conflicting ideas and emotions- about gun violence and democracy and freedom and what it means to live in a free society. AND what I heard this week from all places was the shouting of contempt.

What I heard this week were prayers giving thanks that we're not like one another, rather than prophetic witness about what it's going to take to see our shared pain and be honest with one another; to find a common solution instead of spewing lies and hate at each other.

John Wesley wrote extensively about the problem of sin— the ways we separate ourselves from God and one another even though it keeps us from our own healing. But instead of telling everyone else how awful they were, a tactic readily employed in the 1700's; Wesley looked within. He fully identified with the apostle Paul who wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And Wesley got really curious about how, as people who do not even do the thing we know will be good, how we can rely on God's grace. He wondered what we could do, as people who follow Jesus, so that we would be courageous enough to be honest with ourselves and with our neighbors.

With all of this mulling in my heart this week, I was struck by an interview I heard with the author Elizabeth Gilbert, who has written a few books about her life. Gilbert said she was recently visiting a friend who asked her how she was doing. And Elizabeth said, "I'm doing great. Life is wonderful." And her friend looked at her skeptically and said, "Elizabeth you say that all the time, but then in five years I'll read in your book how messed up your life really is." And Elizabeth's response was, "Yeah, but I'm great at lying to myself— I just find out then too!" We are masters at lying even to ourselves — ignoring what our bodies are telling us all the time; pushing aside discomfort that things may not be right in our relationships; disassociating from one another so we don't have to admit to ourselves or anyone else that we are not living the life we know God is calling us to.

Wesley knew that life— he had lived it early in his career and watched as everything imploded in his life. Which is why he was so passionate about finding another way— of creating a method to live out our faith. And so that early movement of Methodism looked a lot more like organized AA groups than the 1700's cathedral Church of England, because he taught people to take seriously their relationships with one another— they came together in order to be honest with themselves and with their community; to be honest about their failings and their strengths; to hold each other accountable not only to respond to God in faithful ways but also to make sure they were opening themselves up to receiving God's grace. Wesley had a series of questions for them to ask themselves and each other, and one of those questions came directly from this parable: "Have I been grateful that I am not like my neighbor?"

And there were others too: "Am I lying to myself about my intentions and actions? Can I admit when I am lost? How can I lean on God's grace that will always find me? How am I looking for God in my neighbor?"

The religious leader in Jesus' parable was doing all the right things except the one that makes all the difference— he forgot that God's image is in *everyone*.

So what do we do? Wesley gave us a method to do our best in community to be honest with ourselves and with each other so that we can lean on God's grace and love fully and live out of response to that grace. But that doesn't mean there won't be people that we disagree with, or that we see are causing harm. The early Methodist movement was very political— they worked hard to make child labor illegal and taught kids how to read; they spoke out against throwing people into jail because they were in debt; they collaborated to create systems of care that became clinics and hospitals. Wesley himself was avidly against slavery — in the 1700's— and wasn't able to get rid of it, but spoke loudly against it. But Wesley and the early Methodist movement tried hard not to get confused about how to love their neighbor even as they disagreed. That loving our neighbors, or you could say our enemies if you want to, doesn't mean agreeing with all behavior, but rather working towards what love can look like in the world.

This past week I was introduced to the writing of Fredrick Robinson, founder of Public Theology and Practice. And I thought he put it very well:

“The true meaning of ‘enemy love’ [as Jesus calls us to] is about dismantling the systems that make them enemies in the first place. To love your enemies is not to overlook harm— it is to resist it with the full force and weight of your being. Only by dismantling oppression can true love ever be possible.

Indeed, to love your enemies is to work for a transformed world where the structures that create enemies no longer exist, a world where all people can thrive and enmity has no soil to grow in. Loving your enemies means hating their evil by lovingly refusing to become what they are.

The real call is to use holy imagination. To see beyond isolated verses, which can be weaponized, and instead live into Jesus' vision of a just and liberated world.”

So to be the religious leader or the tax collector is to see that the other is as stuck in their world as we are in ours; that so much of the systems we live in we did not create; but we do have responsibility to love ourselves, our God, and one another enough to tear down the systems that have made us enemies; to be honest of when our contempt of one another continues those systems, and to use our holy imagination to create a better world. Sound impossible? Yes. Which is why Jesus asks us not to be like the religious leader, relying on our own goodness; but rather, like the tax collector,

be willing to ask for mercy and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit by whom all things are possible.

Sources used:

workingpreacher.org, commentary by Eric Barretto on Luke 18:9-14

Everything Happens podcast, interview with Elizabeth Gilbert

John Wesley: Holiness of Heart & Life by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr.

Fredrick Robinson, post on Facebook from September, 2025