

June 22 2014

**Scripture Lessons ~**

*Psalm 86*

*Colossians 3: 12-17*

*Matthew 9:9-13*

**Sermon**      *One to Learn With and One to Live With*

Well, there was a thief, and that thief was sentenced to death by hanging for what? Murder? No. For what? Robbing a bank? No. For stealing a small chicken. Before he was taken to the gallows though, he was allowed to make one final address to the king. "Your Majesty," the thief said humbly. "I am the only man living who knows how to make an apple seed that will grow up and bear fruit just overnight. So to atone for my crime I could teach you and your court this wonderful secret, but I need a shovel, and I need a handful of apple seeds, and I need a young maiden who has not tasted love's first kiss.

So eagerly the king, and the king's 13 year old daughter, and every last one of his advisers gathered in an open field to learn this wonderful secret that the man had to share. And in his most elaborate manner possible, bowing and making dramatic gestures, the thief dug a small hole. And now he said, "The water must be poured into the hole by the young maiden."

So the king's daughter stepped forward and carefully poured a small container of water into that freshly dug hole. "And now," he said, "We are ready for the actual planting." And addressing the assembled group, he said, "But the seed can only be placed in the earth by somebody who had never taken a single item that did not belong to that person, no matter how insignificant, no matter how long ago."

"Well," said the King, "I think I would like my most trusted advisor, the prime minister, to be the one to plant the magic seed in the ground."

Hesitatingly, the minister said meekly, “I am afraid I am not eligible, Your Majesty, because when I was young I took a tunic which was not mine to take.”

“Then perhaps it is best the royal treasurer would be the one who would plant the seed,” the king said quickly.

“Your majesty,” the treasurer said, with somewhat embarrassment. “You forget that in my previous position I foolishly kept a small amount of money that did not belong to me.” So one by one the king’s advisors sputtered and explained that they were not able to plant the seed. Finally the king, finally even the king himself admitted that he had taken a small item from his father when he was a small child.

When each had spoken, the thief addressed the king again, “Your Majesty,” he said, “the members of your court of men and women are of the highest ethical standard. He recognized the devoted public servants, but not one of them could say that they had never taken something that didn’t belong to them. How in the world is it then that I am to be hanged for stealing a little chicken.”

The thing about this story, it isn’t difficult to see that this king and his court are present with Jesus in the incident which Micki shared with us in Matthew’s Gospel this morning. You will recall that the scribes and Pharisees played the same role as the king and the court did in the previous story, having the audacity to accuse Matthew or Levi the tax collector and disciples, even eating dinner with Matthew and his friends; as a social outcast Matthew and his crowd consisted of other outcasts, other tax collectors, prostitutes, government officials, and even some gentiles. It apparently did not seem like the appropriate crowd which Jesus should associate with if he wanted to climb that religious ladder of importance of his day.

So the scribes and the Pharisees, of course for Jesus’ own sake, pulled the disciples aside and asked them why in the world Jesus was dragging himself down by spending so much time with the wrong people, with the dregs of society. I guess it is a legitimate question. Kennedy and I were talking about a little bit ago when we might ask ourselves day by day. After all, we are often judged by the company that we keep, and there is a thing as guilt by association. But we should

not think about who our circle of friends include, or what influence that circle has over our behavior; because it is pretty clear that Jesus has called each of us to examine our own motivations, our own behavior, every day when we commit our lives to God.

No, instead the issue is here is how the focus and style of our ministry with other people outside the church will take. Instead, the focus is to think about where Jesus would conduct his ministry in our day; with whom would he sit; how would Jesus treat the people whom he ministered to. If we follow the lead of the king in the story or the scribes or Pharisees, Jesus would have to immediately eliminate certain groups of people from his ministry.

The first to go, of course, would be murders and robbers and criminals who are locked up in correctional institutions. If Jesus wanted to make a big hit in the religious circuit of today he would have to also get rid of the prostitutes and the drug dealers as well. Those are pretty easy to eliminate. So maybe he should sit with the heads of 400 fortune companies, men and women dressed for success. But you know the minute that Jesus sat with those folks eating escarole and scrimp at some penthouse; somebody is going to look at all those people and say, "How in the world can Jesus eat with those people?" They are the same people who make decisions to keep some people rich and some people poor. They are the ones who are polluting our air or soil with their companies. Why in the world is Jesus sitting with those people? Such sinners?" If not sinners then who is left?

Well, I think he could probably sit with us normal people. I don't know whether I want to be one of the normal people or not. Normal people like us who populate most churches we are far from Ozzie and Harriet however; most of our families function pretty well. I think Jesus would be welcome in our homes, but you know somebody from outside would take a look at one of us and they are going to say, "Why is Jesus eating with those people? Isn't that the guy I know for sure cheated on his taxes? Isn't he the one that became an alcoholic over the course of years and their son got in trouble all the time school for fighting and their daughter got in a car accident some years ago and hurt somebody? Why would Jesus sit with that bunch of sinners?" Then who is left?

I left the best for the last, the faith safe group who would sit with us ministers. The fine pastors, the fine priests, the Rabbis, who uphold the fabric of church and society wherever they are. But you know, there will be flies in the ointment where ever they are. Why is Jesus sitting with those hypocrites? A couple of those pastors are constantly trying to steal members from each other. They smile and act as if nothing is wrong, but they really can't stand being around each other. And that pastor is so sick of working that he can hardly wait until he retires. And that gal there hardly spends time with her family because she is away from home so much. Why would Jesus sit with such motley group like that? If not with sinners, then who is left?

Folks, isn't that isn't the point? There isn't anybody thats left. But the scribes and the Pharisees in Jesus' day and our own day don't get it. Jesus came to call. Jesus came to minister. Jesus came to heal not those who were already righteous but sinners. If the righteousness, if there are any if you can find them and if there are some, they are few and far between because we are all equal in God's eyes. We have all taken something figuratively or literally, however small, that didn't belong to us during the course of life, and yet strangely enough in the midst of it we hear his call, nevertheless, to God's love. A call to a new way of life for many others who are not worthy to be called into the kingdom. To stoop as low as necessary, to sort of lift us up and call us to face a brother or a sister. So the good news which we proclaim is this. This is why we come together for worship; why we have Sunday school. This is why we maintain a facility; why we sing anthems and hymns, and why we visit the sick, and have homes for the widows and orphans; why we contribute to a food bank, why we give dollars to the Heifer project, and help with the Daily Vacation Bible Schools. Not because not any of those folks deserve it; we don't deserve it, but because of the forgiving love Jesus has for everybody.

During the coming weeks I invite you to look for ways you as individuals can show this same love, the same grace, the same forgiveness, to others. During the coming weeks let us as a church family do what we can do to embody this same forgiveness in the world around us.

I leave you with this little story. A favorite movie of mine from some years ago features these words. The person said, “You know, each of us is given two lives, one to learn with, and the other to live after we have learned the lessons of life. One to learn with, and one to live with after we have learned the lessons of life.” God invites us to learn in that first life, and God invites us to use the second life wisely; to go into life wisely.

And together we say AMEN.