### “We Have Sinned” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Oct. 23, 2022

**Jeremiah 14:19–22**

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 . . . 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**

9He 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. 11The 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. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But 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!’ 14I 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.”

There is optimism and there is pessimism, and then there is the truth that doesn’t fit neatly into either of those categories. It is a truth that’s rich with experience, and too nuanced to be simply labeled optimistic or pessimistic.

The prophet Jeremiah is often quite pessimistic, and this passage is no exception, but there is hope in his message. He is also honest and devout, and that shines through. Speaking for the nation, he says “we acknowledge our wickedness . . . we have sinned against you” (Jer 14:20). Jeremiah has the humility to admit that he has sinned. He wishes to lead the people in a wholehearted repentance and return to God: “We set our hope on you” (14:22). Again, he speaks for the people, hoping to draw their hopes and aspirations along with his, and lead them to return to true loyalty to the one God.

After all, they know that God *is* real, and that idols *cannot* bring them what they need. He appeals to their knowledge that it is only God who can relieve their drought, who can take care of them. God is the only one in whom they should set their hope. With God they can have a relationship. It is with God that they can seek a conversation.

Jesus is speaking in a different time from Jeremiah’s, at a time when the main representatives of society all believe in the one Lord. Now, the problem is not belief, but arrogance. He gives the example of a self-righteous Pharisee who gives thanks that he is not like a disreputable tax collector, or like the other “rogues, adulterers,” and riff-raff, in his opinion (Luke 18:11). He puts other people down to make himself feel righteous and superior. But, in Jesus’ parable, it is the tax collector who deserves praise, for he was humble and devout, like Jeremiah. He beat his breast, begging God for mercy, and calling himself a sinner (18:13). Translating the last verse more literally, it would read, “I tell you that one went down [from the temple] justified to his house rather than the other one, for everyone exalting himself will be humbled, and everyone humbling himself will be exalted.” The temple was on higher ground than the rest of the city.

This situation could be called the Great Reversal. So many of those who are powerful and influential here on earth will be run-of-the-mill in the kingdom of God, while many of those whom we didn’t notice, who weren’t considered important or powerful will be the respected and admired ones in the kingdom. Some of these supposedly unimportant people were the ones who considered themselves sinners and unworthy, while some who have an inflated high opinion of themselves will not be well-respected or prominent in heaven.

Even in Christian cultures, we have the high and mighty, the well-respected who really don’t deserve that much respect, and we have the lowly and humble who are actually more admirable, if we could truly *see* them. Even Christian cultures are infected with materialistic worldliness, arrogance, and hypocrisy. We often value fame and status more than we ought to.

The kingdom of God will shine a light on these truths, and *true* values will shape our views. In reality, those true values are what the universe already affirms, but our societies—even our churches—are sometimes out of tune with the universe. In reality, true values are already securely in place, although we don’t always recognize them here on this plane. The goodness and blessing of God are always already in place. Even churches could reflect upon what they truly value and what their actions should be.

Our psalm today had an interesting line: “the river of God is full of water” (Ps 65:9). God blesses us with spiritual value and power, already, but even more so when the kingdom of God comes, blessed either in particular moments here on earth or blessed abundantly in *all* moments in the afterlife. The kingdom of God is wherever there is loyalty to the will of God and true values.

That psalm also addresses God in an intriguing way: “O you who answer prayer” (65:2). God is defined as the one who answers prayer. The psalmist asks God for forgiveness and seeks God’s goodness. He affirms, “You are the hope of all the ends of the earth” (65:5).

We should, today, stand on such promises, and believe that God knows us and loves us. Jeremiah, in his agony, asks God to “remember . . . us” (Jer 14:21), but we should trust that God does remember us always, and does answer our prayers. The river of God is full of water. True devotion is recognized. The humble and pure of heart are appreciated.

Remember the story of the Ugly Duckling? His nestmates, little duck chicks, hated him and told him he was large and ugly. One day they told him to go away and not come back. He fell in with a family that included a chicken and a cat. They told him he was ugly, too, and drove him out. He then happened to be upon a pond near some swans, and started to apologize and tell them that he would leave, but they said “Stay here with us! We’ll be great friends.” He looked at his reflection in the water and realized that he was the same breed as the swans, and now he had found his relatives and was accepted by them. He was something much grander and more beautiful than a duck or a chicken. Finally he was recognized and honored for what he was.

We, too, will be honored for what we are, but even more, for what we strive to be. And it is our values that shape what we strive for. Don’t give up hope even when people do not appreciate you.

The spiritual scale of values is the one that matters, despite the fact that this world uses a materialistic scale of values, one that honors power, money, sex, and fame, and knows next to nothing about spiritual realities. These are idols that bring nothing of permanent value. Jeremiah appeals to us to remember that idols can do nothing. Jesus appeals to us to not be arrogant, but to practice our faith with humility. The greatest things in life are the gifts we have been given, and faith itself is a gift we have received. Paul says that God has “assigned” a “measure of faith” to each one of us (Rom 12:3), and, further, “the Holy Spirit has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). Our gifts can grow in grace and glory as we share the Father’s blessings with our family and neighbors.

What do you think your gifts are? Listening, kindness, humility, worship, trust? These you may have, with more to come with your practice of faith. Accept the gift of your God-given capacity to know God and to live by Spirit. Remember, “the river of God is full of water” (Ps 65:9). Be full of this spiritual water, the water of life.