

“The Landscape of the Heart”

Psalm 65; Luke 18:9-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our faith might be renewed to persevere being your people, seeking justice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Do you know the word “petrichor”? It’s the smell of the rain, especially the rain that comes after a period of hot, dry weather, like the kind we’re usually having around here. I smelled it last night. Todd and I were watching TV, and suddenly through the open patio door came this scent, and I said “it’s raining!” We couldn’t hear it or see it, so he opened up his phone, which informed us with its usual precise inaccuracy that the drizzle would continue for 23 minutes and then start up again 7 minutes later. I don’t know about you, but I prefer the information I received from my nose, fleeting though it was.

I mention this because I want to talk about the beauty of mercy today, beauty that can be fleeting or long-standing, but is always shifting. But before we get into that, there’s something else we need to name. This parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector – we must be careful. In these times of growing and increasingly violent anti-Semitism, we need to name and repent of the Christian habit of assuming “Pharisee” is a synonym for “hypocrite.” First of all, it’s not. Secondly, that’s not how Jesus intended it. It’s not how his followers or even his detractors would have heard it. And perhaps most importantly today, to let that false assumption stand is to

play into the marginalization of Jewish people in our times, painting them as “other” and “bad” in ways that diminish their preciousness as fellow children of God.

The whole reason this parable works is because Jesus and everyone around him knew the Pharisees to be righteous people who did their very best to follow the word and will of God. Everyone knew that tax collectors were collaborators with the Roman occupiers who made life miserable for everybody. That contrast is the main point here; it’s what sets up the surprise about which man ends up justified. So let’s stop using the word “Pharisee” to mean hypocrite, and understand that all of us are in danger of self-righteousness and pride.

Now that we have confessed that, let’s get deeper into the beauty of mercy. As I have contemplated the nature of mercy over the years, I have become more and more convinced that it is a central truth of creation. I don’t mean that in a “God will punish you if you’re bad” kind of way. Rather, I keep coming back to this phrase we use at Loch Leven to help the kids regulate their behavior, the idea of “natural consequences.” In some ways, mercy is as simple as the fact that the natural consequences of keeping your nose in the air are that you’re more likely to trip on something and fall down. But beyond the fall that followeth pride, there’s something even deeper. The simple truth is that if you can’t bring yourself to humble yourself before God in an attitude of confession and repentance, you can’t ever experience the beauty and glory and wonder of mercy. And the beauty of mercy is something you really don’t want to miss out on.

In case it's not clear, let me explain what I'm talking about and how I got there from holding our two scripture lessons together. At the end of the gospel lesson, Jesus tells us it was the humbled tax-collector who prayed for mercy who would be exalted. The psalm also mentions God's forgiveness for sins, but then it goes on, with the majority of the verses praising God's beautiful and bountiful creation. One could argue that the thing about forgiveness was just an opening point to a psalm that is really about the beauty of creation. But in conversation with the parable of the two men at prayer, I was nudged to see it differently. What if the rest of Psalm 65, after those first three verses, is a response to God's mercy? What if all those words of praise are not exaltation but exultation, a song reveling in the beauty of God's mercy, using metaphors from nature?

Let's be clear here about the difference; these two words have similar meanings, but they are not the same: "exalt" – the one with an "a" – means to lift something or someone up, to praise or glorify them. "Exult" – with a "u" – is most literally to jump for joy, though it's usually just an internal feeling, a inner sense of jubilation that lifts up our hearts. The opening line of the Magnificat gives us a good sense of the contrast: Mary says "My soul magnifies the Lord" – that's exaltation, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" – that's exultation. To my mind, the closeness of these words hints at the natural consequences of mercy. And Psalm 65 is an excellent expression of this truth.

Having proclaimed that God forgives us of our iniquities, the psalmist goes on to describe what that's like, using the beauty and bounty of creation as the primary metaphors. The mountains and the seas are invoked, as is the vastness of the earth, and God's reach to the farthest corners of it. God's faithful watering of the earth is praised, as a metaphor for how mercy sustains life. "You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth." Can you feel the relief there? The sense of being deeply loved and lovingly sustained? The exultation? Is the psalmist standing on a high peak over farmlands when they sing this? Are they remembering the miracle of their vineyards being nourished with spring rains? Wherever they are, the landscape of their heart reflects the exultation of being forgiven, and they are moved to exalt God.

What the vistas in the landscape of your heart? What is the scene that causes you to exalt God? How might you express your exultation at receiving mercy with a topographical metaphor? Most often, these vistas are fleeting, for our spirits do not sustain exultation for very long at a time. The sun shifts behind the clouds and lights up a distant peak. The noise of the highway dies down right when a hummingbird alights on a nearby branch. The smell of the rain startles us in the middle of a TV show. The overwhelming exultation that floods our souls in those moments is what mercy feels like. For a brief moment, we are reminded of our inner knowledge that the earth is the Lord's, and that includes us and all the ways God's earth sustains our life, and we are moved to praise.

So I wonder where the scenic overlooks are in the landscape of your heart? As you know, I was up in Santa Barbara a couple weeks ago, visiting my family. I was in the car with my Aunt Janet at one point, and she shared one with me. I don't remember what we'd been talking about, but suddenly, she was telling me about a very specific view she loves. My Aunt Janet is a retired naturalist who lives in rural, central Illinois. What you need to know about that is that in the fields all around her, the soil is black – good, rich, black soil. And she was talking about a moment that can happen in the spring, when the soybeans are beginning to grow. Not when they're just sprouting, but before they've gotten so big they cover up their furrows. There can come a moment when they're just the right size, and it rains, and the rain blackens the black earth even darker, and it cleans the bright green plants, and you drive by and see these beautiful stripes of bright green and black, and – well, it's like the psalmist says, “you water its furrows abundantly” and the black earth and the green plants “sing together for joy.”

In the landscape of your heart, mercy may not involve black earth or soybean plants, for the territory of your soul is likely not central Illinois. But if you pause for a moment and try to tap into that sensation of exultation, I think you may begin to see the vista that does represent the joy of God's mercy for you. It's the kind of joy that brings us to humility. The joy that we can enter into if we stop focusing on ourselves for a moment and try to consider how we fit into the larger handiwork of God. The joy of the repentant sinner, not the self-righteous temple regular.

It seems like we often turn to nature for reminders of the vastness and beauty of creation, a way of “cutting ourselves down to size,” that is actually a relief when the burdens of our minds have gotten too big. But I don’t know that we take the next step all that often and see the promises of God’s mercy there in the scenic views we’re enjoying. The moment of humility that nature can evoke in our hearts can lead us deeper in. When we understand God’s mercy as one of the essential threads of creation – as simple and nourishing as the rain, we can grow spiritually and in our commitment to protecting the integrity of creation and the natural cycles that keep our earth sustainable.

Our reality may be somewhere between that repentant tax collector and the self-righteous Pharisee, depending on the day. The mountains around us may be shifting, and the rains may be few and far between. But when we call on God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, we can trust that grace will abound, that mercy will rise up and water the furrows of our hearts, even when the land is dry. Hallelujah and Amen.