

Year C, Pentecost 23, proper 25

October 23, 2016

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Luke 18:9-14, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Justified Already!

On Friday evening Aaron and I returned from our epic journey to Nebraska in time to celebrate Aaron's 39th birthday with family. We had covered over three thousand miles, driven through deserts, mountains, farms and forests. We had seen deer, two pronged antelope, cattle everywhere and one mountain sheep with big curled horns. We have experienced the vastness of our country and find ourselves glad to be home in rainy and beautiful Oregon.

We had a wonderful time and Aaron said he would remember it for the rest of his life. Thank you to the people of Clarkes for encouraging us to drive and for providing vacation time with pay for us to do it. And Tony, thank you for filling in in my absence and for the others who helped him. And thank you Ann for providing us with new banners that I have been looking forward to seeing in our sanctuary for the first time. And Shirley, we did have lunch in Gordon, Nebraska with you in mind. I tried to picture you growing up there and wondered how that geography and culture formed you.

We are back now ready to pitch in to the preparations for the church rummage sale though I don't think I have processed the meaning of the trip yet. It's always strange to go to where I grew up and see the people, all now older, who still live there. We see each other through old lens as though life hadn't altered us even though our bodies reveal many changes.

St. Paul was in a self-reflective place similar to my own when he wrote his second letter to Timothy. Timothy, a much younger follower of Jesus, served as a foil for his reflections. Paul is in jail in Rome as he writes. He is under house arrest and knows that life could suddenly end whenever the authorities get round to ending it.

Paul writes, "I'm already being poured out like a sacrifice to God, and the time of my death is near." Paul's life is being poured out; the pitcher that contains his life-time on earth is being drained. He doesn't know when the last drop will fall. I wonder if the purpose of life is to be poured out. We all have only so much time and our lives will be poured out for something or someone, one way or another. Going back to Nebraska makes me very aware of the passage of time reflected in the aging of faces and the emergence of our children as the new leaders.

Yes, I am being poured out. I poured myself out by going to Nebraska with our son, sharing this life-experience with him. I poured myself out by relating to all my sisters, one of whom I had not seen for 25 years. Each relationship is different and all had assets and liabilities from both sides. I poured myself out to my mother trying to explain to her this God of love that we are discovering here together. She struggles with it and I understand. She said she caught a glimpse but noted that it had taken me many years to make the change. Yes, I said, but it made no difference with God for God loves us all—even when we can't quite understand. I am pouring myself out to you this morning as I attempt to communicate experiences hard to capture in words.

One of my sisters is slowly sinking into the clutches of dementia. She is in a nursing home in Omaha and we wondered if she would even respond to us when we showed up in her room. The nurses lifted her out of her bed and sat her in a wheelchair. She saw me and looked at me a long time as her brain slowly processed my presence. "Hi Tom," she said. "It's good to see you." I responded, "You recognize me! It's good to see you. It's been a long time." A long pause ensued. "Yes, it has been a long time. A lot has happened," she said. "Yes," I replied. "A lot has happened."

She was drooling on her blouse and I suspect it embarrassed her. Out of the blue she said, "They are going to drill another hole in my head and drain off all this fluid." Aaron expressed understanding by saying that sometimes he drooled too. It's the medicine that does it, he said. She took it in. I replied with a smile, "So, You have leaky pipes." Another long pause and we all wondered how she was processing my leaky pipe image. "It's good to have a sense of humor," she said. "Laughter helps." We were all amazed.

She looked at me again for a long time as we waited to see what she would say next. "I have been a person of integrity, I have always kept my integrity; I have not been bad," she said. Behind her words I heard her saying that being here in this nursing home was not punishment from God for being bad. No, she has been good; she has always tried to be good. My heart ached for her. At that moment I realized that I was her older brother, confessor, pastor—her stand-in for God. "No Pat, you haven't been bad." I said. "You have been a good person and a good sister. You don't need to be afraid. At the most profound level all is well. There is nothing to fear."

I don't remember what we said next. I do remember that with her permission we took some pictures. I read aloud Laura's text message, just sent (Laura is my wife) telling me I was to give Pat a huge and a kiss for Laura. After a long pause Pat replied saying I could give her a hug but she didn't know about the kiss. I replied that I was just following instructions so what could I do. I gave her a huge and the tiniest of kisses on her forehead. After about ten minutes, maybe fifteen, I sensed that she was getting tired and her agitation was again increasing. She tried to

stand up but to no avail. I asked that we form a family circle and I lead in prayer. I don't remember what I said. I suspect I thanked God for her and told her that her family loved her very much, though we knew that God loved her even more. I acknowledged that her life had been tough and asked God to help her face the challenges she now faced. I again prayed that she would know that she was loved, and she had nothing to fear. We all said amen and then we left her in her bed with the nursing staff attending her.

What do you say in times like this? We left her in the hands of God as best we could. What else can you do when you live 1600 miles away and nobody can fix it anyway? Shortly after leaving the room Aaron burst into tears. His tender heart needed release. He felt embarrassed and wondered why he was the only one who openly cried. He was grieving for her, for how tough life can be and for the necessity of putting ourselves into the hands of God in raw trust when we have no answers. We were all being poured out. Maybe that is what life is about. Maybe life is pouring ourselves out for one-another.

Paul goes on. "I have fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith." I guess that's what my sister was saying in her own brain-damaged way.

It is easy to feel alien from Pat. She has only one eye, having been assaulted and left for dead twenty-five years ago and wears a permanent expression of fear and horror on her face. When she is frustrated, and she often is, she twists her hands in the air. It's easy to compare ourselves with her and thank God that we are not like that. We do all the right things and she does none of them. She can't. She is locked in her body, in her declining brain and in this nursing home with locked doors.

She has to depend on God's grace alone. She can't depend on convincing herself she is righteous by looking on another with disgust. All she can do is acknowledge herself as a child of God who loves her even more than her family could ever love her. Perhaps she is our families "tax collector," the one who stands at a distance, looks down in shame, strikes her chest and prays "God, show mercy to me, a sinner." In a sense we all helped create her and are no more righteous or unrighteous than she. The difference between us is that we can still look at her and measure ourselves as better and therefore justify ourselves. She, on the other hand, must depend on God's grace alone and for that reason she approaches her final home justified already, just as we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.