

**Riverside United Church**  
**January 19, 2025**

Scripture Lesson: Luke 18: 9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But 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!" I 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.'

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,  
lead us to deeper understanding of you,  
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

**"What we are Meant to do and be #1 - To Heal the Broken Soul with Love**

A couple of weeks ago, during the prayer time when joys and concerns were being shared, there was mention for us to pray for the victims of the horrific situation in New Orleans, when a man drove his truck into the crowd. As that prayer was offered, the words "to heal the broken soul with love" came to my mind because we had just sung "I am the light of the world." And it came to mind because I was thinking about the man who was prompted to commit that awful act. When it came time to offer some words of prayer, I remember fumbling to find some words and don't have the notes about what I said because there aren't any. And then I remembered YouTube - I could hear those words again.

So what I said was "... for our world with so many situations where someone is lost, misguided, fearful, angry and not able to process the experiences of life and acts out injuring and killing others. We pray we may find ways to find healing in the spiritual and mental health of our world. ..."

Two weeks ago, we sang Jim Strathdee's hymn - I am the Light of the World where he builds on Howard Thurman's poem, "The work of Christmas." Thurman's words are:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
 To heal the broken,  
 To feed the hungry,  
 To release the prisoner,  
 To rebuild the nations,  
 To bring peace among brothers,  
 To make music in the heart.

Some of the phrases of Jim Strathdee's hymn are etched into my memory and soul and so as I was thinking about this long Epiphany season - long because Lent doesn't begin until March 9<sup>th</sup> because Easter isn't until April 20<sup>th</sup> - so I thought of this idea of the work of Christmas continuing long after the decorations are put away.

"I am the light of the world; you people come and follow me. If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery of what you were meant to do and be." So, over the next 7 weeks we will explore this theme and unpack some of the phrases of the work of Christmas. And so, we begin with "to heal the broken soul with love."

Our worship centers on Scripture and so as I thought about the phrases from the hymn, I began to think about parables that Jesus taught. So, you could also say that this Epiphany series is a series on the parables of Jesus, as found in the book of Luke.

In today's parable - the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector- the two main characters represent the two opposites of faithful living - the devout Pharisee and the cheating tax collector. At least that might have been the perspective of the hearers of Jesus as he began to talk. But parables rarely unfold according to the expectations of the listeners, especially those listeners "*who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*" The Pharisee - the professional religious person in the story - is thankful that he is not like all those broken souls - the thieves, the rogues, the adulterers, or even this tax-collector. He prays with his credentials. But a parable usually has a twist of perspective and so we hear that the tax collector is praying: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

So the parable invites us to reconsider which character has the broken soul that needs healing. Jesus says about the tax collector: "I 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."

The reality in the parable is that both of them are broken souls  
 The reality is that all of us are broken souls.

So, part of our work is to heal the broken soul with love.

A number of years ago, we had a retreat here with leadership by Peter and Sue Short.

It was an important time of deepening our spiritual community at the time we did it with the Anglican congregation that was also here. One of the things that I remember from that time was the emphasis that Peter Short put on how we all have spiritual work to do in our lives. We are dealing with loss. We are searching for identity. We are working at recovering from hurt and disappointment. We are discovering purpose. We are absorbing beauty and embracing mystery. That's the spiritual work of our lives, and those are very important and very human processes of the mind, and the heart, and the soul.

The path of religious thought and tradition offers wisdom for that work. Human knowledge and social sciences offer wisdom for that work.

We also know that there are competing sources for the human soul as other values are taught by our society and world. Values that feed on fear, on greed, on selfishness and can leave many broken with disappointment, etc. Religious traditions have done some damage as well, as exploitation, fear and shame have been the tools of those who believe they are the righteous ones.

It can be hard to process the experience of life in healthy ways, when our beings are so complex. We all have spiritual work to do because we are human and spiritual beings.

So, we are invited to remember to heal the broken soul with love. How do we do that? With love. With understanding and openness. With accountability and grace, and with some of the other things we put in that "Soul" first aid kit.

There is a mental health crisis in our society, and I would suggest that is also a spiritual health crisis - not because many don't go to church, but because there haven't been the experiences of community, of exploration, of identity formation. And so that vacuum is filled with lots of other options that don't sustain the soul for long enough for growth and maturity of soul to take root. While some voices in our world say that we can go it alone - we can't. There is also the spiritual crisis of believing that in order for us to have meaning and power, we have to be afraid of some other group or be thankful that we are not like those people over there.

Our broken souls need healing, and love is the way of healing and transformation. God is the power of love, Jesus lived and taught that love is the greatest gift and most important commandment. Jesus invites us to follow and to learn the mystery of who we are, and that path is not private or individual – it's for all of us. There is a lot of spiritual work to do of finding our way forward in our world, a way that doesn't discard the least, that doesn't run on judgement of fear, that doesn't reward self-righteousness and greed.

When I sing the phrase "to heal the broken soul with love", I often call to mind and heart John - a man who I got to know 40 years ago. 40 years ago this summer, I did an internship in Hamilton exploring ministry in criminal justice systems. I lived in a recovery

home for those living with an addiction to alcohol and one of the staff of the home was John. John had lived on the streets of Hamilton for years, addicted to alcohol, in and out of jail for crimes that fed his addiction. He had changed, was living in sobriety and had become employed by the home that had helped his recovery and transformation.

As one of the activities of that summer, I met with a judge to talk about the court system. And when I was mentioning what I was doing and who I was and all that stuff I told him that I was living at Bold Park Lodge's 3/4 house, and he asked me if I had met John. I said I did, and I asked him about how he knew John. He kind of laughed, because he had met John on many occasions, but he said that John was the miracle of his career on the bench; he wouldn't have imagined the change he knew had happened for John.

When I told John that comment, it led to a conversation about what had made the difference in his life that led to transformation. John said that the difference was the friendship and support offered by a man who walked with him through his recovery program. He had tried before but this man's support had enabled him to see who he was and could be. It was the unconditional love of this friend that been the path to healing; a love that he had not known growing up. *To heal the broken soul with love.* I also came to know the friend who offered that love - not by exalting himself, but by walking humbly with John, with God.

So, we are all invited to offer love and support to one another because we all have spiritual work to do, so may we open our hearts and souls to know healing and the mutuality of love. Amen.