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Morningside Presbyterian Church
Text: Luke 18:9-14

Where Are We Standing?

I stepped up to the small rubber plate and stared down the opposing pitcher.
The ball flew my way.

Time slowed down, and I powered through the pitch with all my might.

My determined look shifted to a faint smile as the ball sailed over the chain-link fence in left field. I rounded first while watching the ball bounce into a roadside ditch.

My faint smile shifted into a look of jubilation as I saw it was a homerun. My gait slowed and my fists pumped my fist outwardly from my chest.

Here I was, Chris Peters, smashing homeruns in Miami, Florida in July 2004.

I traveled to Miami to co-lead a group of 34 youth from Seven Oaks Presbyterian on a mission trip with DOOR-Miami. D-O-O-R is an acronym for, “Discovering Opportunities for Outreach and Reflection.” DOOR’s national network of outreach hubs includes a very active and faithful group right here in Atlanta.

Large groups are split into smaller groups to accommodate local organizations that can only host a handful of volunteers.

The day was Friday and we’d made it. My small group was exhausted from our previous labor.

We’d sorted food supplies for local migrant workers in a warehouse,
chopped sugar cane taller than our heads in Homestead,
and helped with cleaning at an outreach center.

My group was tired of hearing the fun stories of other groups as we always arrived late and always fought to get the first shower...
reeking from our path-clearing,
stinking from hauling boxes.

And, then Friday dawned. When the DOOR intern told us we could wear shorts to our site, we knew *this* site would be different. When we heard that we would be working with children – playing games and helping with basic learning skills – we were elated. We wouldn’t reek and we wouldn’t stink at the end of this day...

After helping the teachers through various learning activities we went outside for recess. One of the children asked if we could play kickball. My youth enthusiastically said, “Yes!” I was also enthusiastic at the opportunity to cut loose and just play. And so the game began.

We had a blast, intentionally causing errors when the ball would come our way so the kids could get a hit here or there. And, then it happened.

I came up to kick and unintentionally drilled a homerun, right over the left-field chain link fence. I’ll admit I got caught up in the moment, partly at the cheering of my team of 4th and 5th graders. As I rounded the bases, my celebration grew outward and by the time I rounded third I was doing a white-guy trio of the Moonwalk, Carlton, and Dirty Bird on my way home.

I turned toward the plate and was met by an 8-year-old kid who enthusiastically yelled, “YOU’RE OUT!”

“I’m what?”

“YOU’RE OUT!”

And so I learned that on *this* blacktop kickball field, in Miami, Florida, you don’t hit a homerun unless the ball crosses the street.

I was out.

I had gotten caught up in a self-righteous moment – dancing around the bases, caught up in my own ability to kick a rubber ball over a fence. In reality, my dancing was made low by someone who was standing, standing in a reality that was bigger than a self-righteous youth director who didn’t know the expectations of the game.

Speaking of expectations, this past Sunday I was observed by one of my professors as I lead a small group of Morningside members in a reading of our passage from Luke. We met in the youth room – 5 MPC members – 1 youth, 4 adults – Kathy Dawson, a Christian Education professor from Columbia Theological Seminary... and myself.

We gathered to read the text, but I started by asking (requiring) everyone to play Two Truths and a Lie – a game where you share two truths about yourself and one lie and the group tries to guess the lie. Thankfully everyone stayed through the game.

And so we read the text, mostly using practices I’ve gleaned from preaching classes at Columbia.

We went around the table, reading verse-by-verse. We highlighted the verbs in order to see movement in the text. And, we *embodied* the text, trying to visualize what this parable Jesus told might look like.

Tara Parrish was kind enough to be our Pharisee – that’s no comment on her. I asked her to stand far off and embody a posture of praying. She kneeled, folded her hands, and bowed her head. We were getting somewhere!

Joseph Green was kind enough to be our Tax Collector – that’s no comment on him. He stood toward the other far corner of the room and acted out beating his chest as he imagined what it would like. It was exactly how I had pictured it as well... exaggerated, crying out to God for mercy!

Another group member said, “But what if he was hunched over? That’s I see it. Head hanging low, slowly beating his chest remorsefully...” That second image isn’t one I had visualized and it seemed to be a response rooted in a different kind of humility. I think both of these images make sense – we respond to God’s mercy in different postures.

We respond in moments when we can’t believe our own sin, when we can’t believe our own capacity to hurt others or to hurt ourselves. We respond in moments when the brokenness in and around us has us broken down. We respond in moments when all seems lost. We respond in moments that are real, that are human.

Either way you visualize it – a moment of forceful response or a moment of solemn response, the Tax Collector in the Temple has a lot to teach us.

Standing far off, asking for God’s mercy – humble.
While the Pharisee, a very religious person
Stands or kneels or sits on the other side, watching the Tax Collector – self-exalting
Praying, “God, I thank you... that I am not like other people.”

Other people –thieves, rogues, adulterers, even this tax collector.”

Now if you’re like me, you may be thinking that the Tax Collector is the “good” person in this parable and the Pharisee is the “bad” person. The tax collector is going to God, and seeking God’s mercy. The Pharisee is going to God and judging those who he isn’t like.

But, I don’t believe it’s that simple. The tax collector was a representative of the Roman Empire, and it was his job to collect money from the residents of his assigned communities. Truth be told, his earnings came from collecting off the top, and in the eyes of the majority, tax collectors were not respected. A first-century audience hearing this parable may very well want to identify the Pharisee as “good” and the Tax Collector as “bad.”

If anything, they’re both reflections of humanity, both reflections of the brokenness we can all encounter and we can all embody. Moments when we can’t believe our own sin. Moments when the brokenness around us has us broken down. Moments when all seems lost. Moments that are real. Moments that are human.

This Friday morning, I logged onto Twitter to catch up with what’s going on the world in 140-character bursts, and I saw a helpful tweet. It was from account of Henri Nouwen.

Henri Nouwen, a great spiritual writer and Catholic Priest, died in 1996, so it's not Henri Nouwen holding an iPhone, tweeting out his thoughts. It's someone from his organization tweeting quotes. I love Nouwen's take on our lives as followers of Christ – it's rooted in the reality of life.

Life is hard. We are broken. Still, God is merciful.

So I always stop when I see a Nouwen tweet. It read, "God is most present when we are most human."

"God is most present when we are most human."

When we are beating our chests, asking God for mercy. God is present, standing with us as we turn from brokenness and toward God.

When we are standing off to the other side, God is present. God is present in those challenging parables of Jesus – reminding us that the justified respond to God's mercy with humility.

So, I wonder... where are we standing today?

Are we seeking God's mercy?

Are we being humbled by this parable?

Are we being challenged to respond to God's mercy with gratitude and humility...

Two weeks ago I traveled to Louisville, Kentucky with a group of nine Columbia Seminary students and two professor mentors. We gathered with 40 more seminarians, mentors and Presbyterian Church USA staff people. We traveled to Louisville for a Company of New Pastor's Welcoming Gathering.

We worshipped – singing out of the new Glory to God hymnal, tasting the bread and grape juice at communion, hearing the word of God preached.

We broke the bread of meals together – intentionally sitting with seminarians from other communities, identifying our own stories of call through hearing the stories of others.

And we heard several plenary keynotes. Charles Wiley, the (??) at the PCUSA offices asked the question. What does it mean to be Presbyterian? The natural answer came, "it means we have elders – the Greek word presbuteros means elder!"

Charles replied, "your right but..." and Charles went on to challenge us to reconsider our faithful polity answer – "presbuteros means elder" and to consider what the Presbyterian Church USA does especially well, uniquely well.

Charles said he believes being Presbyterian means having a focus on Grace and Gratitude. Grace and Gratitude.

It means affirming God's grace which first claimed us and living with gratitude – living in response to God's grace.

“Grace and gratitude – it's that simple,” Charles said.

If gratitude is our response to God's grace that claimed us before we were born, where we're standing matters.

And sure, the Pharisee was expressing gratitude – but for his best intentions, it's an entitled gratitude that was thankful for what he.. thought.. he.. wasn't. The Pharisee's gratitude wasn't focused on God's mercy, God's grace. The Pharisee's gratitude was focused back on himself.

Where are we standing?

Let me be clear that when I ask, “Where are we standing?” it's a metaphorical idea. You don't have to be able to physically stand to ask this question. Every Sunday, our Head Pastor Baron invites the congregation to stand, “in body or spirit,” when we say the Call to Worship.

When we ask “Where are we standing? We are asking a question of our inner intentions, not one about physical ability or a physical place.”

And in this parable, Jesus is asking a similar thing.

Like I said earlier, acting the passage out can help us to get the point. Tara, kneeling in a posture of prayer. Joseph, emotionally beating his chest, seeking God's mercy. These images embody the passage in a way that helps us to go deeper into the story, it draws us into the parable as we visualize what might be described. Body language matters, and so embodying a passage of scripture can be helpful!

But, when we ask, “Where are we standing,” we are asking a question that goes beyond what we can see, beyond the words of the Pharisee and Tax Collector. We are asking a question of comparing entitled faithfulness and reliance on God's mercy – the mercy that knows us before we know or claim it, the mercy that liberates us from the burden of sinfulness, the mercy that justifies us!

We are justified by God's grace alone – not by what we do or don't do.

If anything, the parable of the praying Pharisee and the chest-beating Tax Collector speaks to an understanding that justification (being set right with God) does not come by tithing or fasting. Being set right with God comes through faith, it comes through confession.

But being set right with God doesn't mean we're sinless. It means our sins are forgiven in God's sight. It doesn't mean we're sinless, but it frees us to become more faithful and loving in our lives. It frees us to respond to God's grace with gratitude!

We have gathered here to worship this morning, a body of people wrestling with doubt, striving to live good lives, hoping that there is something more meaningful than the brokenness we see and encounter and default to in our own actions...

But here, we stand on the foundation of God's mercy – God's justification that brings forth a life lived in love for God and neighbor. When we ask the question of justification we can't help but follow it with the question of sanctification – God's work through the Holy Spirit to make us more holy, more faithful, more loving. So let us stand on the profound hope of God's mercy – not our works or our comparisons with the work of others.

Here we stand – in gratitude to God's mercy – in gratitude to God's grace. So, when we're here, where are we standing?

Pulpit

- Where are we standing when the word of God is read and proclaimed?
- pastor, lay reader, This I Believe, youth liturgists

[Walk out from pulpit to different areas and ad-lib]

Communion Table (“Empowered”)

- Where are we standing when we break bread and drink wine/juice together?
- In this meal we give thanks for all God has done and is doing!
- We are renewed, empowered, sustained, and sealed in God's covenant of grace!¹

Baptismal Font (“Yes!”)

- A place of saying “Yes!” to God's mercy, with our own voices and on behalf of those who cannot yet speak!
- Say “Yes!” to the beginning of life in Christ!²
- Say “Yes!” to God's redeeming mercy offered to all people!³

Aisle (“Together!”)

- Where are we standing when we stand together in spirit?
- Where “ when we pass the peace, sing, confess, and say what we believe?
- Emphasis on response to God in community (?)⁴

Doorway/Narthex (Point toward... “Response”)

- “Liminal” space-between church and world

¹ PCUSA Book of Order 2013-15, W-2.4004

² Ibid, W-2.3007

³ Ibid, W-2.3006

⁴ Ibid., W-1.1005

- Stand in gratitude – responding to God’s grace as we go out into our daily lives
- Empowered and sustained by God’s work in Holy Spirit

[Back in Pulpit]

So... where do we stand?

We stand in response to God’s mercy extended to all people!

A mercy that knows no human boundaries!

A mercy that dares us to stand together!

A mercy that dares us to stand as one in Christ!

[Pause]

So....

Let us stand, together, and say “Yes!” to God’s mercy with gratitude, and sing (Hymn # ___) in response to God’s mercy!