

## Life's Ups and Downs

Luke 18: 9-14

Life has its ups and downs. You could say it's something like riding a roller coaster. I remember the first time I rode the King Cobra. It was the first roller coaster I ever tried with a loop meaning you actually went upside down. The design was pretty simple. The track went straight forward, through one big loop, to the end then backwards to the beginning. I remember getting on and the car went up. The further up it went, the more I wanted it to go down. With a roller coaster, you usually get that wish. It went down – fast, then around loop. I wanted to be right side up and I soon got that wish. Then the car went back up toward the end of the track. Again, I wanted to stop and I got that wish. The only trouble is that it stopped then started down backward really fast. I went around the loop backward, upside down, then back up and finally finished back at the start. I actually didn't get motion sick because I was too scared.

Life is kind of like a roller coast with its ups and downs. Downs lead to ups and ups give way to downs that usually lead back up. The downs let us appreciate our successes and our joys. These cycles are important. When you get stuck in the ups or the downs, the successes or the failures, you are unable to grow and move forward.

Jesus' parable features a Pharisee and a tax collector praying. They represent the extremes of ups and downs and highs and lows in his society. The Pharisee was a religious ideal -- a professional religious scholar who, according to the Law, was highly moral and very knowledgeable. In fact, Pharisees had an amazing knowledge of the text of the Bible, but Jesus said they missed the point, the meaning of that text. Because of pride, they tended to be judgmental and arrogant, not loving or compassionate.

Tax collectors were just the opposite of Pharisees. Though they were usually wealthy, they were not independent in their wealth. They were despised for ripping off their own people. In truth, they were really controlled by the Roman authorities. Required to pay large amounts of money to the Romans, the only way they could avoid losing their own land was to exploit their fellow Judeans. The price they paid for financial survival was to be ostracized socially and religiously. Tax collectors were considered sinners just as much as prostitutes and Gentiles.

Jesus' parable really used extreme examples. The Pharisee's prayer was "I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." It sounds like a sincere statement of appreciation not to be in the situation of the tax collector and other sinners – thankful not to be cut off from the community in this life and doomed to be cut off from God eternally. The tax collector's prayer was, "God be merciful to me a sinner." They were honest words from a beaten man who was tired of being ashamed and desperate to be loved.

Finally, Jesus posed the central question, "Which one was made right, justified, with God?" Was it the one who was more faithful, disciplined, and strong – the one who appeared to be more God-like? Was it the one who was such a pathetic mess that he could not deny it? He was in desperate need of God's forgiveness and love.

Jesus' explanation was this: "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but [those] who humble themselves will be exalted." So, is it better to exploit people, taking advantage of them, then beg forgiveness and mercy, than even to try to follow the rules or be disciplined and moral? Clearly that's not what Jesus was advocating. The point of the story is the importance of recognizing our need for compassion, our own need to grow and be aware of our growing edges.

Our lives are journeys lived in the rhythm of disciplined loving and being deeply in touch with our need to grow and improve. C. S. Lewis told a story that illustrates this idea of life's ups and downs.

We are taking a mountain hike to a village that is our home. At midday we come to the top of a cliff where we are, in [actual distance] very near it because it is just below us. We could drop a stone into it. But since we are not skilled mountain climbers, we can't just climb down to it. We must go a long way around, five miles maybe. At many points during that detour we shall be farther from the village in actual distance than we were when we sat above the cliff. But, in terms of progress we will be far nearer to being home. At the top of the cliff, we are near the village, but no matter how long we sit there, we will never be any nearer [home]. What is near God by likeness is not necessarily any nearer in approach to God. Conversely, the approach to God can involve walking a path that seems to take us farther from a nearness – likeness -- to God.

(C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, with some paraphrasing)

The Pharisee was clearly closer in likeness to God, but was no closer in approaching God. He was highly disciplined, very knowledgeable, and extremely religious, but caught by pride and out of touch with his need to change and grow. It's like he was sitting on that cliff looking at his village and enjoying the nearness while forgetting that life is all about walking the trail, taking the journey, toward God. The tax collector was not very near to God – not much like God. He knows that. With the admission of his need for mercy and compassion, the tax collector is on his way toward God.

How do you navigate the ups and downs and *backs and forths* of life? Make no mistake, the rhythm of life moves up and down. It's all part of the journey. Like the Pharisee, sometimes we seem to have it all together. We even pat ourselves on the back – give ourselves a little reward. Like the tax collector, sometimes we find we're on the ground and have to pick ourselves up. What tools do we have – what does our faith offer – on the journey?

Jesus' parable reflects what religion in his day offered. You could be righteous – do it right – like the Pharisees. Of course, they tended toward a dogmatic, rigid, literal, and fundamentalist approach – a Pharisaic approach to faith. Clearly, they were the ones who did it right and were loved by God. The other option was to be outcast -- a condemned sinner. These were the lost ones who needed to be saved through the Temple system of sacrifice and forgiveness.

Here at Crossroads Church, we're aware that faith has many resources for the journey. We affirm the need to walk the walk, to take the journey with intent. We encourage you to bring your questions and ask them openly, to find your passion for ministry and follow it. We affirm

that we can trust the Spirit and lean on the community. In addition, we recognize two ancient practices of faith: meditation and prayer.

Meditation is a process of letting go control, of quieting the conscious mind and being open to the sub-conscious mind. This is another way of saying that meditation is a way of being open and available to the movement of the Spirit. Through meditation, we can receive knowledge, mystical awareness, and become attuned to a level of consciousness that is the dimension of spirit. Meditation is vital to the journey in that we become aware of how near we are to God – in touch with the spiritual dimension of life.

Prayer is an effort of the conscious mind attuned to the needs of others and ourselves. Through prayer, we request God to act and pledge our own participation. In praying, we find ourselves approaching God, desiring God's will, and committing to act in concert with God in our lives. In the action of praying, we might even lose sight of God as we focus on the needs we see around us. Prayer can itself be an act of faith in the reality of a God we don't necessarily feel or perceive. Prayer is walking the journey without always seeing the destination.

Meditation and prayer symbolize the extremes of faith – the taking on and the letting go. We sing a song here at Crossroads that uses a verse from the Old Testament book of Job. The verse says, "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'" (Job 1: 20-21 -- KJV). By this, Job meant that God had given him life and, in the context of the story, had taken away Job's wealth, health, and family. Through all this, Job was able to say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." The meaning of the words in the song we sing "You give and take away," is to affirm that there is a rhythm to our lives that includes gaining and losing, success and failure. In all the ups and downs of our living, we can proclaim, even if we don't feel like singing, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

We can meditate and contemplate the closeness of the God we see, yet without approaching. We can pray and walk the path, often without seeing clearly. Are you sitting on the cliff contemplating your nearness to God, yet not actually moving toward God in your living? Are you on the trail, but perhaps out of touch with your goal? Have you lost sight of the God toward whom you are living? Most often, we move between these extremes – contemplating and then working, letting go control and then taking on responsibility. This is the rhythm of the journey. Each of us dances as an individual, but we travel together. Each of us has a unique song to sing, but we sing in concert. Come join your song with ours and let us make the music of the Kingdom of God and blessed the name of God together.