

**June 3, 2020**

**By Bishop Steve Breedlove**

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" Luke 18:13*

So many words have been written and spoken about the events of the past week. I hesitate to pile on. Most of us are tired of words. We long for a silence that is fruitful, thoughtful, healing. We'd like to talk together, not just at each other. We ache for action, if it could make a difference.

Luke 18:1-30 (Monday's Gospel reading from our Lectionary) relates two parables and two stories. These four pericopes offer exhortations to God's people, giving us hopeful direction for this time of societal conflict, violence, fear, and loss.

For Jesus' words to take root, however, we must agree that our cultural context demands response. We can (hopefully) have fruitful discussions about the nature of political process, or the difference between institutional and systemic evil, or the place of individual sin versus societal sin. As we talk, we may need to work through disagreements about causes and solutions. But we cannot simply "watch Rome burn." Jesus did not leave us to burn: he came, he wept, he taught, he preached, he healed, he loved, he suffered, he died. His followers cannot but see the world through his eyes. He calls us to take up our cross and follow him into the fight for the souls of people and the wellbeing of our world (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Timothy 2:1-7). How? Pray, repent, pursue "children" and "childlikeness," and act sacrificially.

Luke 18:1-8: Society pushes back – often rightly – when public figures say, "You're in my prayers." It's not that many people object to prayer: they simply do not want people to pray and do nothing. Prayer is often a euphemism for non-action. Yet Christ urges us to pray. This parable of the persistent widow exhorts us to always pray and not lose heart. Jesus says, "Stir up faith. Relentlessly knock on the door of heaven."

But how do we pray? High levels of social conflict, division, and physical dangers threaten us. We face a serious possibility of long-term economic slowdown which puts nearby people at risk of job loss and real deprivation. It's easy to be overwhelmed. "What good can I do? I don't even know what to pray in the face of such a mountain of pain!"

What we're up against is systemic evil and brokenness. Scripture identifies these systems as "the world, the flesh, and the devil." The "world" is a system of accumulated pressures, powers, and processes that operate like a relentless current taking us toward conflict, crisis, and confusion. The "flesh" is the systemic, accumulated impact of human

nature: we are all driven by passions and self-will. The “devil” is a “who” – the spiritual power who takes advantage of the pull of the world and the pull of the flesh. He and his demonic forces actively use every weapon at hand to incite us to sin or to sully and sour our best solutions.

No individual can bring about cosmic systemic change. Even if we were all in unison about what we want society to look like, no one has the power, or exactly the right ideas or methods, to figure out how to work for the good of all. Any progress toward systemic good would require people and institutions to move together toward right action. It is beyond our strength and skill.

Do we do nothing? No! We pray. For real! We labor in prayer. We fight in prayer. We dig deeper. We cry for mercy and deliverance. We persist before the only One who has the power to save and transform people, and therefore transform society. We pray for cosmic, deep, enduring spiritual and practical change no matter how dark it is outside.

Luke 18: 9-14. The first frontier of prayer is personal repentance – a determination to see ourselves before God as we are, without excuse. We must face “the things what we have done and the things that we have left undone.” How am I participating in the systems of the world and the flesh? In what ways have I given the devil place in my decisions? Any roll-back of systemic movements of evil requires a systemic movement of godliness and good work: only God has the wisdom and power to accomplish that. But if we want to be part of it, we must start by facing our junk, for real.

Luke 18:15-17. Humility and childlikeness follow, both conspicuously missing in the current public square. Jesus commands us to protect and help children, that is, the weak, vulnerable, and needy. Reading the Pentateuch these past months, I’m amazed at the persistent will of God expressed in commands to care for the sojourners, the poor, widows, and orphans. It’s everywhere, writ large and clear. One universal about all these categories? None of them could own land, which was the guarantee of financial security. These were at-risk people.

Which leads logically to . . . Luke 18-30: Get practical with your faith. None of us can expect to follow Jesus and simply have our own comforts baptized. Sacrifice has to cut deep. It costs to be an agent of the Kingdom in this world. Where are we letting go of the riches we cling to in order to use our time, energy, and resources to help those in crisis?

Prayer is essential for systemic societal change. But God orchestrates systemic change when his people face sin, accept their humble role, look for ways to protect and care for at-risk people, and literally let go of resources and time to help others in need.

And now we know what to pray for communities and friends! Eyes to see the roots of systemic problems, which are spiritual. An awakening of prayer. Personal responsibility and penitence. Humility and determination to protect the humble around us. Practical sacrifice to build resources to alleviate risks.

Fascinatingly, after these four teachings, Jesus reiterates in Luke 18: 31-34, “The Son of

Man is going to Jerusalem, and he will be delivered over . . .” The One whose sacrifice paid the price for our sin sets the example. Will we follow? If so, there is real hope for participating in the work of his Kingdom in our broken generation.

Grace and peace in Jesus,

Bishop Steve