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Joel 2:23-32

Psalm 65

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18: 9-14

Massachusetts desegregated their schools in the 1960's. Instead of walking to the Tenth Street School in my neighborhood, I rode the bus every day to a school in downtown Lowell. That is where I first met Pauline. She was the new girl in my fourth-grade class. Pauline was different than the kids I went to school with. She wore the same thin cotton dress every day without a coat, she had no tights on her legs and her shoes were too big. Pauline's arms and legs were covered in bruises and scars. She lived in a rundown apartment building at the last bus stop before school where she waited for the bus each morning, alone. She went to school with us into the winter months that year. On one bitterly cold morning, when the bus was late, we found Pauline on the sidewalk shivering violently from the cold. The driver gently picked her up and placed her in the front seat of the bus next to the heater and rushed us to school. I remember the teachers using their own coats to warm up Pauline. I never saw her again. She was swept into the world of foster care for abused and neglected children.

There are many cases of people using their power or their strength to hurt the weak among us. For Pauline, it was someone she loved and trusted. I'm sure that using violence made the abuser feel righteous and powerful but she was just a little girl.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus is speaking to some who are confident in their own righteousness and power. He tells this parable. A Pharisee and a tax collector go into the temple. It sounds like the opening line to a joke, except it's not funny. The Pharisee, a member of a powerful religious sect, self-righteous and a hypocrite, stood before the altar, raised his eyes to heaven and said, " God, I follow the law by fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of my income to the

temple.” He wanted the Lord to know how virtuous he was. This was his way of measuring his worth. The Pharisee went on to say, “Let me tell you about that tax collector over there. He is a sinner. He works for the Romans, takes money from the Jews, and pays the foreigners who rule over us. He is a wealthy man who doesn’t labor; his money comes from his own greed. Lord, I am so glad that I am not like him.” The Pharisee has compared himself to the tax collector and in his judgement found the man lacking.

Standing on the other side of the temple is the tax collector. He is also praying but he can’t lift his eyes. He is too ashamed. He is beating himself up for working for the Romans, taking money from the Jews, and paying it to the foreigners who rule over them. He doesn’t labor, his greed has supplied him wealth. The whole litany of complaints the Pharisee made are true and the tax collector is begging for God’s mercy. The Pharisee has come to the temple hoping for accolades for his level of commitment to the law and the tax collector has come begging for salvation from his sins but does not tell us he will change his ways.

Jesus says the tax collector went home justified for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted. This is one of the major themes of Jesus’ teaching, the raising up the least powerful among us. Other teachings include, “the meek shall inherit the earth, and the first shall be last.” C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* wrote, “the utmost evil is pride. Anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that are mere flea bites in comparison. It was through pride that the devil became the devil.”

Pauline, the little girl from the beginning of my homily has no control over her life. She is powerless but her simple story is important. I still remember Pauline, who neglected and abused faced the world with all the dignity she could muster. The only kindness that she received back then was from a bus driver and school staff when she was suffering from hypothermia.

She was treated as though her life was menial and the authorities made the choice of who would love her and who she would love in return. I pray that the Lord strengthened her through those trials.

The Pharisee boasted and the tax collector begged for mercy; Pauline begged for love that didn't hurt. Pauline's life was meaningless to the adults who should have protected her. She begged for a life without pain. I can only pray that she triumphed in the end.

We interpret scripture through several lenses. The first is its historical context, then the relationships among the characters, the actual words spoken and the last through the lens of our own life experiences. The Pharisee was undeserving of praise, the tax collector threw himself on God's mercy. Pauline's sad and violent life is the reason we should follow Jesus' teaching that we should raise up the downtrodden and love each other. After all is said and done, just 3 remain, faith hope and love and the greatest of these is love. (1Cor 13:13)