

The Truth about Arkalalah

October 27, 2013

Shepherd's Grace Church

Luke 18:9-14

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The 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. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But 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!’ ¹⁴I 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.” (Also Read 2 Tim. 4: 6-8, 16-18)

Earlier in the day, I talked to the children about Halloween. We talked about the *Truth about Halloween*. In our conversation I shared with them some of the origins of the holiday. The truth is that the celebration was originally a pagan holiday that was converted to a Christian holiday and has now been stolen back to the pagan side. Without getting into the more adult issues surrounding this holiday, I encouraged our kids to celebrate Halloween. Why? I believe that if we are to make a difference in the world in which we live, we as Christians must claim everything for Christ. We can choose to bury our heads in the sand and say that Halloween is a pagan holiday and refuse to allow our children to dress up, or we can get involved with our children and encourage them to dress in costumes that reflect our values as parents and as Christians. We can choose to let our children go out into the neighborhood and gather as much candy as they can without paying attention to those who are in the neighborhood with them or we can choose to encourage our kids to slow down a little, to help the younger kids and to recognize that some have greater needs than others. We can choose to allow our kids to grab the candy and run at each house in order to get on to the next one without saying thank you to the givers or we can choose to remind our children that each time someone opens their door they are sharing their love and a part of their life with them. We can remind our children that God opens His door to us and wants us to share life in abundance. God's light is always on, his dish is always full, there is always a smile on his face, and he always wants us to knock, to seek, to find a closer relationship with him!

We can choose to remove ourselves as Christians from the world, but Christ prayed for us as those who were in the world but not of the world. His prayer is offered that we might change the world! The “Truth about Halloween” is that we have a chance to change the world by participating in and reclaiming the traditions of the world for Christ! If we think about it, reclaiming Christ in Halloween which means “Holy Evening” is no different from reclaiming Christ in Christmas and Easter which are

also Holy Days we have taken from originally pagan celebrations so that we might share the good news of Jesus with those who may not hear it any other way. Today we come to share the truth! The truth as we always tell the kids is always Jesus! Jesus is always the answer!

I think that is where the Apostle Paul meets us this morning as we try to discover another truth, "The Truth about Ark-a-lalah." As we begin, I wonder if you ever thought about a truth of Ark-a-lalah. Most of us simply go. We ride the rides, eat the food watch the parades and catch up with family and friends that we maybe haven't seen in awhile. We do not look for a deep hidden meaning or a symbolism in all that takes place. Ark-a-lalah is simply a place to blow off steam as we end the fall and move toward a colder weather season where we will have to spend more time indoors.

But what if there is more? What if there is a message in Ark-a-lalah! What if there is something we are supposed to gain from the whole experience. Paul says to Timothy this morning, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race!" What Paul is saying is that he has lived his life! He has lived it to the fullest! He has accomplished what was given him and now is a time to remember.

On Saturday, I worked at the Kiwanis Pancake Feed. Usually, I am one of the cooks but this year, because of the cold I am currently getting over, they moved me away from the food. I am sure you all will not mind that I didn't sneeze on your hotcakes or blow my nose over your food but we all agreed it was in everyone's best interest!

Instead of cooking, I was assigned to take tickets. I sat at the desk and collected tickets from each and every person who ate pancakes on Saturday...1911 tickets! As all nineteen hundred people came through the line I had a chance to talk to them...to all of them! I had a chance to listen to the kids who were fussy and impatient, to the people who got stuck behind the queues and had to wait several minutes before being served, to the ones who could not find their plasticware or who weren't sure where their friends were sitting! I had a chance to talk to ALL OF THEM!

I had a chance to talk to Betty Harper and Jack as they came through with about 30 of Jack's family. I had a chance to watch as they laughed and shared stories in the line and I had a chance to watch as they took care of one another; especially the kids, and made sure that everyone got what they needed!

I had a chance to see Phil and Carolyn Osborn come through the line. They were there with about 60 of their closest friends and family! I watched as they sat fairly near the place where I was stationed. They occupied almost an entire row of tables and chairs and they held court there as others came by and visited with them as they ate. I watched as the older kids like Kitra and Kayla helped younger ones enjoy the pancakes. I laughed with them as they cleaned up spills and dealt with other disasters of the day. I listened as they told stories of Ark-a-lalah past and remembered those who had gone before them!

I had a chance to listen as runners came through the line. They had just finished the two mile run. Some came through as friends, but others as family. Fathers came through with daughters. Sons came through with mothers. Many said, "I ran this race with my dad or mom about 30 years ago. Today I ran for the first time with my son or daughter. I hope I'll be around to watch them run with their kids!" I heard many of these stories and I thought about Paul's comment. "I have finished the race!"

As I thought about these people and about Paul, I remembered all the races I had run...3 marathons, 10 half-marathons, dozens of 10k and 5k runs...probably a hundred or more t-shirts and many medals...not for winning, but for running the race! It was interesting as I remembered the races I had run the first memories that came flooding back were those of family! The first half-marathon I ran, my daughter Amanda came all the way from Dallas to root me on. She and Rochelle were right there at the finish line when I crossed and they had an ice cold diet Dr. Pepper waiting. The first 10k I ran in Texas was one I ran with Amanda. My last marathon was a brutal race in heat that I had not prepared for. Amanda and Erin and Rochelle ran the last 2 or 3 miles with me rooting me on to the finish!

Paul's memories were of the finish, just as mine were. His memories were of the rewards of finish, the promise of Christ, the joy of eternity. He lamented that he had not had the encouragement but he remembered the support! He knew the feeling of family. As I listened in the line on Saturday that feeling came surging through to me in conversation after conversation! Perhaps that is a part of the truth of Ark-a-lalah.

Perhaps, however, it is only a part. For most, the celebration begins on Wednesday evening. People gather for the night parade and they take pictures and begin to eat the food and share in renewed relationships. Jesus tells us the parable this morning of two men who went up to the temple to pray. It is important to remember that the parable is not addressed to all the people. The parable is one of a very few passages in the entire Bible that is exclusive! It is addressed only to some, to those who regard themselves as righteous and hold others with contempt.

Those who gather for Ark-a-lalah gather to celebrate. They gather to be in conversation and they gather to rejoice. The two who Jesus mentions this morning gathered to do the same thing. One gathered to share his accomplishments. Certainly we meet those people at Ark-a-lalah. We meet the young men and women who have been away at school perhaps for their first semester. They want to brag about their accomplishments and about how their lives are unfolding. We meet the business person who has just experienced a recent success he or she just can't wait to share!

Are you one of these people? When you meet others at Ark-a-lalah are you quick to share? Do you have to make your accomplishments known? As Jesus identifies the tax collector this morning, he identifies him as standing alone. Is the person alone because others cannot abide being near him? Did he drive them away? Did he make himself such a nuisance that others got tired of listening and left him

there to be in conversation with God? Did the man set himself up as alone? Did he choose to flaunt his own superiority and consciously shun others?

As we think of this man this morning can we ever imagine ourselves as him? Can we imagine creating a situation where we are superior to others? Can we imagine setting ourselves apart and lauding our own attributes over those of other people? One of the truths about Ark-a-lalah is that it can often become clickish. Those who have often separate themselves from those who do not have. We can see it on the streets. We can see it around the food booths. We can see it at the pancake feed where those who come in hungry go back over and over again until they are full while those who have plenty spend their time talking and laughing with friends.

In the world today, we see this same attitude about people who look different from us. We see Hispanics and we assume they are here illegally. We see blacks and we watch them a little more closely to make sure they are not doing things that are inappropriate. We, as a society say, "God I thank you that I am not like these others; thieves, rogues, adulterers...or even like this tax collector." One of the truths about Ark-a-lalah is that it is a time where we see others and we do segregate ourselves from them because we are different! Because they are different!

Today, Jesus preaches to some...to those who trust their own righteousness and reminds them that they need to break down the walls of difference and reach out to all. What he is really saying is that in our difference, we are really the same. Difference is our greatest similarity. We are all different and if we are ignoring one group there is probably another group ignoring us! When we hear the truth about temple, about prayer, about Ark-a-lalah, we have the opportunity to be mindful of our own actions. We can be different but we must recognize that our difference is our greatest strength. The Pharisee lists his strengths. He fasts, he tithes, but does he love?

As he gives his gifts, does he give them with an open heart or does he follow the letter of the law? When we come back to Ark-a-lalah do we come back to listen to others, to celebrate their accomplishments or are we like the Pharisee who just can't wait to boast of our own glory even to God? The truth about Ark-a-lalah can be a coming together! It can be a time of rejoicing with one another. It can be a time of celebration. I am told that the Native American word for lalah is "to celebrate." Ark-a-lalah can be that time if we will stand together...if we will listen to one another...if we will truly rejoice in our lives together. Jesus does not want us to be the excluded who trust in our own righteousness, but rather He invites us to come together!

The other man who stands apart...the tax collector, what are we to make of this man this morning as we study the truth of Ark-a-lalah? How are we to identify with this one. He has been pushed out to the very fringes of society. He wants to come, to be a part, to celebrate but he knows he is not worthy. He knows he has sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God and he is embarrassed! Is there any here

today who has not experienced his humiliation? All of us, we are told in Romans 3 have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is not one save Jesus who is worthy to stand in God's presence.

The truth about Ark-a-lalah is that this weekend is a time to return to our roots, to return to our traditions, to return to our friends and seek acceptance so we might strive to move forward in our lives absent the guilt and shame of our past! Ark-a-lalah is a powerful time of coming together that can allow for forgiveness for those who are willing to forgive! The tax collector stands alone waiting, watching wondering...perhaps hoping for God's grace to be made known to him.

We think of the tax collector as someone so reprehensible that we should avoid him. He is not worthy of our notice. Brothers and sisters, without Christ there is none among us worthy of God's notice! Without Christ, we all stand alone! We are all the tax collector because of the sin we have committed in the world. We may think like the Pharisee that we are not thieves or rogues, or adulterers but whatever our sin it keeps us from being in a right relationship with God! There is NO DEGREE OF SIN and God cannot tolerate the presence of any sin!

Until we receive Christ, there is not one of us able to approach the throne of God. The verdict for any of us in this world is and will always be guilty, but Thanks Be To God, our punishment has already been served, our debt has been paid, our reconciliation is complete because of the work of Christ on the cross! In that one moment when He died completely and fully, he paid for the sin of the world completely and fully...and in that one moment when He rose from the dead he brought the gift of eternal life to every one of us!

The sinner who stands alone beating his breast today needs to hear this "Good News!" He is alone because Jesus is extending to all of us an invitation not to trust our own righteousness or even our own salvation, but to take a risk and move toward the marginalized man who has not yet heard! The truth of Ark-a-lalah is that it is a time when we can come together and celebrate and for those of us willing to humble ourselves it is a time for witness. Our success this past year has nothing to do with anything we have done, but all the glory belongs to God!

Will we move to the one who stands alone and share with that one from our good fortune or will we continue to leave him standing alone beating his breast! What does God do? Notice that this one goes down justified in his prayer. God hangs on his every word and extends His every grace. God sends His Son for this one! God rejoices with this one for he was lost and alone in the world and now he has a new relationship! Now he can die as one who is prepared to live and he can live as one who does not fear death; so that living or dying, nothing can separate him from the great love he now knows in Jesus Christ!

Are we like God in our actions toward those who look so very different from us? Do we welcome the stranger? Do we acknowledge the homosexual, the Hispanic, the hurting? God admonishes us! All who are exalted will be humbled. All who humble themselves will be exalted! The truth about Ark-a-lalah is that this weekend is a tremendous time for us to humble ourselves! Ark-a-lalah is a time to celebrate and it is a time for community to become communion. Community recognizes everyone and allows them in but welcomes no one. Communion serves to unite us even in the midst of our differences because of the one who is the same, the Body we Share the Cup we drink, the Christ who serves to redeem us and welcome each of us. Ark-a-lalah is a time when all of us regardless of the color of skin or the heritage of our ancestors or the economic status we enjoy can set aside our differences and celebrate...Together!

But as you have seen there is the potential to leave others out in our celebrations. Many, those to whom Jesus speaks today want to lift up their own accomplishments without regard for the accomplishments of others. Some want to believe they have accomplished all they have accomplished on their own. This brings me to the final truth I want to share today about Ark-a-lalah. That truth is family. Some want to continue to be like the Pharisee who lists all the great things he does for the Lord's service.

The reality is we can accomplish nothing outside of Christ who gives us strength! We might like to believe we are worthy but all have sinned and all have fallen short of the glory of God. There is none, not the Pharisee, not you or me who could stand before the judgment of God. That is not only a sobering, but humbling thought. As we consider the week of Ark-a-lalah perhaps we should be humbled rather than exalted! Perhaps we should come home to our community eager and willing to listen to the stories of other people's lives and the struggles and successes they have had! Perhaps we should be less eager to speak and more willing to listen. Perhaps we should bow our heads and give thanks, pleading for God's mercy and grace rather than relying on our own less than worthy efforts at accomplishing that which is hardly worth accomplishing outside the Lord!

What better place to start listening than in our own families. Many of us have brothers or sisters we have not seen in a long time. Instead of getting caught up once again in the same old sibling rivalries, perhaps we should just spend time together, listening to and learning about what is really going on with the people we profess to care most about in the world. Maybe we cannot solve the immigration issues of the world but maybe...just maybe we can solve the lack of communication that seems to exist between us and our brother or sister!

Maybe we should spend some time talking to our families as the Osborns do or as the Harpers do; taking them all to the pancake feed and sharing some of our time with them instead of treating them to rides and other events that will continue to pull us all apart. Maybe...just maybe we should recognize, each and everyone of us that we need an extra family day for Ark-a-lalah.

That day is Sunday; a day where we all take time to come together and give thanks together with our loved ones and our friends; a day where we all recognize together that this community event we celebrate once a year was created to be exactly that...a community event where every person is welcome and every person is made to feel special and every person begins to recognize that here in our little corner of the world we are all unique...and we are all people of incredible worth!

As I look around this morning, I wonder where the family is...the family that comes together to celebrate and the family that stays together to give thanks! By now you have probably noticed that I have been writing the name of our celebration in a hyphenated way. I have done that intentionally to illustrate that we have not yet come together. There is the Ark—the whole city. There is the a—the individual who lifts his or her accomplishments above those of others. There is the lalah. The noise and the funk of the celebration without the true unity our founding sponsors might have intended.

The correct way to write Arkalalah is as one word intended for one celebration and including one thanksgiving...yours! And Mine! This year, God invites us to all come together for the parades and the rides and the food but God invites us to stay together for the faith! This year, bring your family, share your faith! Have your fun! And that's the truth!