

Sermon – Sunday, October 23, 2022

Rev. Randi

I like to set goals and check them off when I reach them. For example, did I work out today? Check. Did I meditate today? Check. Did I read my Bible today? Check. Did I say my prayers today? Check.

Setting goals to keep us physically, mentally, and spiritually healthy is good. But sometimes, we use them to justify ourselves, especially compared with others. For example, we may say to ourselves or our doctors: “all my relatives are overweight like me, but I work out every day, and they don’t, so I’m doing better.” Or, “I didn’t read my Bible today, but I read it yesterday. That makes me better than most people, whose Bibles only collect dust.”

Sometimes we also begin to think that we are OK and don’t sin because we consider ourselves better than others. For example, we read our Bible and pray most of the time, and all the people we know only do it occasionally. Therefore, we’re not sinners. Or, we only think vengeful thoughts about people but don’t really kill them, so we’re OK. We don’t need to ask for forgiveness.

But, the standard for our lives isn’t other people. We’re not disciples of other people. We’re disciples of Jesus. So, the standard for our lives is Jesus.

When we compare our behavior with that of Jesus, we realize we miss the mark. Jesus always prayed, loved everyone – including his enemies -- and was the embodiment of Scripture. When we compare our behavior and hearts to that of Jesus, we realize that we’re actually like the tax collector. We miss the mark a lot compared with Jesus, who never missed the mark. We’ve got a lot of work to do. And we need to repent, which is realizing we’ve missed the mark and trying to change. We are also in need of God’s forgiveness and mercy. And we need to recognize that we only are righteous in God’s eyes through that mercy. Even if we read our Bible and pray every day, if we are proud of ourselves for having accomplished this, we need God’s mercy. Because, of course, pride is a sin, too.

The good news is that God’s mercy is eternal. God is always willing to forgive when we come to God, realizing that we need God’s mercy. Consider the people of Judah, whom we read about in the passage from Joel, for example. The whole nation had turned from God and wouldn’t turn back to God. So God allowed their country to be devastated by foreign armies and locusts. However, God also is merciful, and we see that God is renewing that nation, despite its sinfulness. God is sending his Spirit into the land, and once again, they have hope. They can see visions of what God will do for them.

The passage in Joel also appears in the story of the day of Pentecost in Acts. The writer of Luke, of course, also wrote Acts, and I believe he included the Joel passage in the Pentecost passage for two reasons. First, on Pentecost, the people showed signs of being led by the Spirit, which was reminiscent of what was written in Joel. Also, we are justified and can continually receive the Spirit despite often missing the mark because of

what occurred just before the Day of Pentecost – that is, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

A God who is merciful to a whole nation of people is also merciful to us, especially now that we are living after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. To gain that mercy, however, we need to realize we need that mercy and ask for it. We must recognize that we need that mercy because we miss the mark as we try to live as Jesus did. Even if we think we are doing a better job of being disciples than our neighbors, we still miss the mark.

We also need to trust that God will provide that forgiveness and mercy and that God can help us better follow Jesus from this day forward. We need to stop congratulating ourselves for being better than some other human.

We will always be forgiven when we come to God, realizing we need that forgiveness. We are forgiven not because of who we are but because of who God is.