

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The Third Sunday in the Season of Thanksgiving
October 23, 2022
“All By Myself” by Rev. Sue Trigger

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Psalm 32

(CEB)

The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven,
 whose sin is covered over, is truly happy!
 The one the Lord doesn't consider guilty—
 in whose spirit there is no dishonesty—
 that one is truly happy!
 When I kept quiet, my bones wore out;
 I was groaning all day long—
 every day, every night!—
 because your hand was heavy upon me.
 My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought.
 So I admitted my sin to you;
 I didn't conceal my guilt.
 “I'll confess my sins to the Lord,” is what I said.
 Then you removed the guilt of my sin.
 That's why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times,
 so that a great flood of water won't reach them.
 You are my secret hideout!
 You protect me from trouble.
 You surround me with songs of rescue!

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Luke 18:9–14

(CEB)

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: “Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers— or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

Holy Wisdom, Holy Words
Thanks be to God!

“When I was young, I never needed anyone.” I loved that song back 70’s. Anyone remember the artist? (Eric Carmen) When I was all by myself, I was thinking about what I wanted from my future. I was definitely going to college. I was going to either teach public school or church education. I was going to pull myself up by my bootstraps and make something of myself. Now when I look back at my life, I could easily stand proud of all that I have accomplished all by myself.

My story probably sounds pretty familiar to most of you. No doubt you have your stories about your aspirations and goals and the ways that you made something of your life. That’s the ethos of the American dream isn’t it? We have a strong American work ethic that lures us into believing we can have all we want if we just pull up our bootstraps and get out there and make it happen. It is an ideation that is more myth than reality, but it is an attitude that shapes many of our attitudes. It has led to a kind of righteous belief that I’m am justified in thinking I am better than someone who has not had the same advantages. It leads to pride and boasting, “When I was in college I worked two jobs while student teaching, and I didn’t have transportation. I walked a mile in subzero winters to get to the school where I taught and then another mile to get to work. I have given my life to serving God, thank goodness I’m not like those heathens who can’t get out of bed and make something of themselves.” I did, and I did it all by myself. It’s so easy to sink into those weeds. I’m not saying we can’t be proud of our accomplishments, but when our attitude becomes self-righteous, we move into dangerous place.

Jesus had some words for lofty opinions of self, didn’t he? He set up today’s story with a Pharisee and a Tax Collector, one highly revered in society and the other looked down upon. The Pharisees were a religious organization who, even though the majority of them were businessmen and some leaders in the Synagogue, only a few were priests. None the less, they had a great deal of sway with the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the court system for Israel. Their responsibilities were political, religious and judicial. They worked hard in service to rise to this level of leadership and they were pretty proud of themselves. But Jesus popped that bubble, “I tell you, the tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will

be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.” This is a great example of what I like to call, “Jesus the great leveler.” Throughout the gospels Jesus is quite clear, all are welcome in his community, but there is no place for self-righteousness, nor is there room for an ignoble attitude feeling like you aren’t good enough to be part of his community. Jesus makes it clear, everyone stands on equal, holy ground.

Remember the book, “It Takes a Village.” Hilary Clinton’s book, “It Takes a Village,” was a great contribution to society as she reminded us that we travel through this life together. Sometimes I need a hand, and sometimes I need to lend my hand to you. I wouldn’t be here with you today without my family, my church family, my professors, colleagues in ministry, the support of the PCUSA, and you, too. My story is the story of a village, and yours is too.

Today, in the spirit of our Season of Thanksgiving, I want to take some time to give thanks for the people who have been our village. I want you to think about a time when your life was changed for good because of someone else.

I am going to ask for volunteers to share some stories. I am especially looking for stories about the GCPC community. What have you experienced in this community that has changed you for good, perhaps inspired you, or lifted you up when you were struggling. Take a moment to think of that story.

I wanted to share these stories today because these are the stories that are the heart of Grace Covenant. It is so easy to look at the church through eyes like a Pharisee. The success or demise of a congregation is based on the performance of the church staff, especially clergy. But at its core, the work that changes lives is much deeper than what we all see on the surface. Jesus gave us a ministry that included gathering for worship and teaching, but equally important was the relationships he built. Jesus was about building community. In his community everyone is on an equal playing field. The one who gives the most money does not get better treatment than the one who can’t give much. The one who leads the capital campaign is not worth more than the

person who leads youth team. Each person is important to the community and each person has a role. If you can give generously, God knows we need your help to support our ministry at GCPC. If you can't participate in the life of the church because of health concerns, we need you to support the church in prayer.

There is a cute adage that goes like this. What is missing from church? UR. It's a good reminder that the deep work of the church is what's happening after worship and Sunday school are done. It happens in the hallways after a Bible study or meeting. It happens in the parking lot. It happens in phone calls, and text messages and cards sent. It happens when we host houseless guests and make them meals. It happens when we collect donations of shoes, and sundries and food. It happens when we stand up and seek justice. It happens when we look each other in the eyes and love them as God's beloved child.

Today, I am looking at each of you. I see you, and I give thanks for you, whether you are here in person or worshipping with us online. You are God's beloved child. Please know that I love you. I love seeing how you have loved others, too. I also need you. The truth is that the effectiveness of any pastor depends on the engagement of the congregation. Whether our ship sails or sinks depends on all of us together. That is the community God gave us when Moses received the ten commandments on the mountain. It's God's design for us. So when someone says they don't need to be part of a community to have faith, that may be true in an intellectual exercise, but it isn't true in practice. Christianity is a religion of community, followers who are bonded together so that all will be changed for good. In order to be a little piece of the kingdom of God in Overland Park, KS – we need each other. Everyone who is worshipping with us here today are here because God has brought us together for this time and this place. We've done some amazing things together. My prayer is that we will continue to grow in our relationships and our commitment to this community so that we can continue to be changed for good. I give thanks for this community, it is a gift of God. I give thanks for all the change it has done, it is doing, and it will do; may it all be done for good.