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Lessons in Luke: Spirit-Driven Change

Luke 6:43-49

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There is so much good stuff in today's Scripture reading that I don't want to waste a minute. I want to just dive right into it. Let me encourage you to grab your Bible or open a Bible app on your phone or tablet and follow along with me. Now, together, let's read these words of Jesus from Luke chapter six, verses 43-49. Dr. Luke writes,

⁴³ "A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ⁴⁴ A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thornbushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. ⁴⁵ A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.

⁴⁶ "So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? ⁴⁷ I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. ⁴⁸ It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. ⁴⁹ But anyone who hears and doesn't obey is like a person who builds a house right on the ground, without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

First, let's put these words of Jesus into the larger framework of the story that Luke is telling in this gospel. It'll help us to make better sense out of what Jesus is saying. So take a look at Luke, chapter 6, and you'll notice that people have started following Jesus, and it's no wonder why. In verses 6-10, Jesus heals a man with a deformed hand and then taught that life is less about laws and more about love. You can imagine how the people loved that. It's no wonder that in verses 17-19 we read that people from all over the

region started following Jesus, wanting to touch him and to learn from him.

But that doesn't mean that Jesus' teachings were always easy. Not by a long shot. Starting at verse 27 Jesus calls his followers to love their enemies; to bless those who curse them; to give generously to those who can't pay them back; to refuse to judge others; to deal with their own brokenness before pointing an accusing finger at the brokenness of others. Friends, that's hard stuff. And we can just imagine the people thinking to themselves, "Could we just go back to the fun and easy stuff? You know, the healing and love over law stuff?"

And that's when Jesus suddenly starts talking about trees and fruit, figs and brambles. And as he continues, we realize he isn't really talking about agriculture; he's talking about us. He's talking about those who follow him. He says, "*A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.*" You see, Jesus has just called his followers to some really hard things. Loving our enemies? Blessing those who curse us? Giving and expecting nothing in return? Refusing to judge others? We all struggle with these things, just as those first followers did. And Jesus, like a good doctor, knows that these struggles to love and forgive and bless, are merely symptoms of a deeper problem. The real problem is our heart. Underline that important word, heart, in verse 45.

Now, in the first century, people didn't think of the heart as a blood-pumping muscle. Nor was it just the seat of emotion. The heart was the very center of the whole person. It's where every thought, desire, action and word flowed from. Just as unhealthy fruit is a symptom of a deeper problem within the tree, our propensity to judge, to curse, to hold grudges, and to be stingy point to a deeper problem within us. A heart problem. That's what Jesus says. And then Jesus... just leaves it there. He just leaves it hanging. He diagnoses the problem, but he doesn't prescribe the treatment.

In fact, he twists the knife a little deeper when he starts talking about houses and foundations. And once again it's clear that Jesus isn't talking about construction; he's talking about his followers. He's talking about us. He says that if you follow him and call him Lord or Master, and hear his teaching but don't do

it, the challenges of this life will blow you over like a house built without a foundation. Now, let's be clear. Jesus isn't talking about who gets into heaven, or who God loves. All of that is a gift of grace. Jesus is simply saying that the way to experience a rock-solid life, the kind of abundant life that he promises, is to do what he says. The problem, of course, is that we don't. We can't. At least not consistently. We all struggle to love without limits, to give without hope of return, to forgive when it isn't deserved, and to bless those who have cursed us. And why? Jesus has already told us why we struggle: because we have a heart problem.

So, where does that leave us? I'd say, "pretty hopeless." And perhaps that's just where Jesus wants us. Convicted of our own brokenness. Wrestling a bit with our own inadequacy. Coming to terms with our deep need of heart-healing. And what Dr. Luke, the author of this Gospel, is trying to show us repeatedly is that Jesus is in the business of healing. Go ahead and page through Luke's Gospel right now and note the number of healing stories. More than any other Gospel writer, Luke records Jesus healing people in body, mind and spirit. Jesus even raises the dead. And if Jesus can do that, Jesus can certainly heal our wounded and sin-sick hearts.

This is not new news. God had promised long ago through the prophet Ezekiel that he would remove people's hard hearts and give them new hearts so that they would be capable of following God's commands. In Ezekiel 11 God says, "I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart, so they will obey my decrees and regulations." And that promise finds its fulfillment in Jesus. Saint Paul put it this way in his letter to the Philippians, "For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him." (Phil. 2:13)

So, what is this passage calling us to? I think it calls us to a classic Lutheran dance called "Law and Gospel." It's a waltz actually, a three-step dance in which we come to terms with our condition, dare to believe that Jesus can heal us, and then actively entrust ourselves to his care. I want to challenge you to practice this dance this week. So, allow me to be your dance instructor for the next few minutes.

Step one of this dance is to allow the law to show you the hopelessness of your condition. Or, to use Jesus' language in today's text, step one is to come to terms with the severity of your heart disease.

Just as it's easy to live in denial of the severity of an unexpected physical diagnosis, it's also easy to live in denial of the severity of our spiritual heart disease. So let's break through that denial. How? By trying on your own to live out Jesus' words perfectly. This week, every moment of every day, love every person unconditionally... from the heart. When someone offends you deeply, let it go completely. If someone asks you for something, anything, give them twice as much as they request, especially if they don't deserve it and can't repay you. And, of course, judge no one. Just for a week. See how it goes. Of course, you already know how it will go. You probably won't make it out of bed on day one before failing, and neither will I. I might just as well tell you to hold your breath for a week. But try it anyway, until you're ready to admit the severity and hopelessness of your heart disease; to come to terms with just how far our hearts are out of alignment with God's heart.

Is that an uncomfortable place to be? Yep. Humbling? You bet. But Jesus put it this way, "*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there's more of God and God's rule.*" (Matthew 5:3)

And that leads us to the second step in this dance. It's the step of believing, daring to believe that while we can't cure our heart disease, God can.

There's a story in Mark's Gospel about a father who brought his son to Jesus for healing. The father was desperate and so he pleaded with Jesus saying, "*If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.*" Jesus responded, "*If you are able? All things can be done for the one who believes.*" Immediately the father of the child cried out, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"

Isn't that how it so often is with us? In desperation we want to believe and yet we so often struggle with doubts. Can believing really change anything? Do I believe enough? What about all of my doubts? And that story in Mark's Gospel teaches us that we can bring it all...our weak belief, our struggles and doubts... and the act of bringing it all is belief enough.

And then the third step of this dance is the step of entrusting ourselves to the healing. That's ultimately what faith is – the act of entrusting ourselves to God's love and care. It's an act of surrender. It's like lying back in the water. If we struggle, we sink. But if we entrust ourselves, surrender ourselves, we float. And this isn't something we do once. It's something we do every day, even every hour or every minute of the day. And that's the dance I want you to practice this week.

If you happen to be a part of a recovery community, like AA, you already recognize this three-step dance. They're called the first three of the Twelve Steps.

Lot's of our disciples have found hope and healing through this spiritual pathway called the Twelve Steps. Listen to how these first three steps have worked in the life of just one of our disciples:

(Video)

"Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." That is a quote by Bill Wilson and the founders of the recovery program Alcoholics Anonymous.

What is this path? It is the program of recovery as defined by the Twelve Steps of AA. Initially a program to help chronic alcoholics recover their lost lives, it has become a path that millions have used to overcome not only addiction to alcohol and drugs, but other addictions as well. In fact it has been adapted as a path to help us live better lives in general. Here at Prince of Peace, the Twelve Steps for Christian Living program is just one example.

My name is Mark and I am an alcoholic.

I became the Prodigal Son in all his humiliation and misery. As the story says, I spent my inheritance in riotous living, and that involved taking in increasingly prodigious amounts of alcohol.

At first it was fun, friends, parties and what not. But there came a moment when essentially I left all of my good judgement behind. All the values and beliefs my parents tried so hard to instill in me were washed away. Frankly, I had no idea how fast this was happening to me, but as I kept moving down this path the powerlessness of my situation became more evident.

Well like many, I came to that fork in the road, and had to make that choice of what path I was going to take. That happened in the ER of Hennepin County Medical Center where I had gone because of acute withdrawal from alcohol. This was not the first time either. As alcoholics, we are reminded that alcohol is "cunning, baffling and powerful" and that is a great, great truth.

It was at that point, however, that the "still small voice" of God came to me and gently, but firmly laid out what was ahead. I was reminded I had been given the gift of free will; I could still choose. If I wanted to keep on, I could have a life of physical misery, emotional and mental turmoil, live in a spiritual wasteland and encounter insanity and even death. Or I

could choose to get help and take recovery seriously.

I made my choice and knew what I had to do. That really was my turning point.

I was fortunate to find a Step Group which focused on working each meeting through one of the Twelve Steps. All of the Twelve Steps have an important purpose, but the first three are critical to meaningful change.

The First Step is: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." Once we take this first step sincerely and wholly life can begin to change. It is not easy though. Once we admit this powerlessness over our addiction, the illusion that we could somehow "take it or leave it alone" is shattered. We don't have that comfort of denying who and what we are any longer. For many of us it is said the First Step takes away any remaining enjoyment we may have gotten out of drinking. This is the only step we can practice perfectly, and the foundation of all that comes next.

The Second Step is: "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." Most of us had nearly or completely abandon the concept that there was a greater power than ourselves. We could handle our alcohol, could quit anytime we wanted. Yet when we took that First Step that illusion goes away. We needed help. Where to go? We were reminded that there were millions around the world that have faced this same choice, and if we wanted what they had we could listen to how they overcame their addictions.

The Third Step is: "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." So many of us had moved so far away from God that we had no idea how to start to even understand God again. Yet, to see how we had run our lives, and what a mess we had made of them, told us we needed to do something radically different and that was to come back to whatever notion we had of God and make a decision to let Him run it for us. For many of us this was an even harder step than the first two. How can I turn my will and life over to an unseen God and trust that God will actually run my life? And yet as I found, God will do that if I earnestly seek him. This has proven true.

I was fortunate that I was young when this happened to me, because it was well before I met my dear, beautiful wife and before we had and grew our family. God never went away, but rather helped me

renew my relationship with Him and grow my faith in ways I could not imagine. I had time to regroup and reinvigorate my career. My wife and I built a beautiful life together, and all because I was given what I think was a last but very profound choice.

If that is my Road Less Travelled, the choice was the right one and indeed it has made all the difference.

Pretty awesome, isn't it? Confession, faith and surrender have such power in our lives.

We can't heal our wounded and sin-sick hearts. But we dare to believe that God can. So we entrust ourselves. We surrender it all one day at a time. That's our spiritual practice this week.

And while it may seem beyond belief that such seemingly simple steps could change anyone, the testimony of those who have walked this journey say otherwise. They may not be able to explain how it makes a difference, but they can bear witness to the fact that it does. They can tell you how it brought them from death to life. They may call it the work of their "higher power." We would call it the work of the Holy Spirit, whose outpouring and ministry we celebrate on this Pentecost Sunday.

Friends, this practice won't make you perfect. We'll still struggle to love. We'll still wrestle with our wounded and sin-sick heart. But perfection isn't our daily goal; progress is. Each day experiencing just a little more of the full and abundant life that Jesus promises. If you want to build your life on something more solid than sand, this is a pathway, a road worth dancing down.

And as we begin this journey, let me lead you a guided meditation as a first step:

Sit comfortably, close your eyes and take a deep breath, holding it for a moment... and now slowly exhale it.

Become more aware of your body and how it softens as you relax.

And now imagine a room or a place where you feel safe. Your own sanctuary. It may be a real place or one in your imagination. It's a space in which you can let all your defenses down and be fully yourself. Rest for a moment in that space.

Now place your hand over your heart and feel it beating. Give thanks for your beating heart.

And now, bring to mind something in your heart that needs healing. Perhaps an old wound, a habit you'd

like to change, something that you know is out of alignment with God's heart.

Now take your hand from your heart and extend that hand, palm facing up. Offer your heart to God.

Now silently pray these words, "Heal my heart, Lord." Repeat those words like the chorus of a song.

And now, having entrusted your heart to God, imagine yourself leaving your sanctuary, and dancing into your day.

Amen.