

What You Have To Say For Yourself

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For a good portion of my growing up I stared at a stained glass window. For eleven of my early years I attended a church that had one stained glass window and it was situated in the rear and center of the chancel much like this one. It depicted the scene of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is kneeling down and his hands are clasped and his eyes are gazing into the night sky and the cup of sacrifice from which he is praying reprieve hovers above him. In the background is Judas marching toward him leading the temple guard. I stared at the picture, as I said for 11 years and if you add up one or two services a week for that many years – it means I stared at it for over 500 hours. 500 hours. That’s a long time to stare at a picture. If I could draw, I am confident that nearly forty years later I could render that image with nearly 100% accuracy -- it is so emblazoned in my mind. Jesus of Nazareth on his way to the cross appealing for mercy.

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Now the truth is if you have been a regular worshipper here at Church of the Palms for any length of time you could as well claim hundreds of hours that you have stared at a stained glass window – namely the window at the rear of our chancel – the Palms window. It is a striking window designed by the Willett studios in Philadelphia. The image is a bit more opaque than the one I stared

at in childhood – but most can make out what is happening. It shows from the bottom a procession of pilgrims parading away from us each holding a palm, a symbol of worship and allegiance. They are making their way upward to the New Jerusalem from which the rivers of life are flowing. It is the path upon which each of us finds ourselves.

Now what you might not make out in this window is the inlay of the cross in the center of the window. Lighter panes of glass create a subtle image of the cross through which the pilgrims pass on their way to the New Jerusalem. Perhaps too subtly the window conveys to us who have been staring at it for years – is that the ultimate pilgrimage of life and death is in and through the merciful act of God on the cross. This is our hope. Our only hope. We who would make our way to the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, have not much to say for ourselves outside of our appeal to the mercy of God.

It brings to mind the story I just read to you from Luke's Gospel - the Jesus story that he tells about the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. And the Pharisee's prayer turns out to be his spiritual resume – all the good things he's done that qualify him for God's team. The frequent flyer points that have earned him a first class flight to the bosom of Abraham. Next to him is the tax collector whose only prayer – whose only prayer – is to say, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." And Jesus says if there is anyone who got it that day – if there is anyone who could have any assurance of ending in the bosom of Abraham -- it was the man who knew his only appeal was to the mercy of God.

In his masterful requiem, Gabriel Faure, in the final movement reminds us that our only hope is that we might be received in eternal rest alongside of Lazarus the beggar. Lazarus the beggar who from another story of Jesus, again from the Gospel of Luke, is a sick man outside a rich man's gate. The rich man has everything by which to justify himself, but the poor man has nothing. Begging for

scraps. Nothing to show for himself. Nothing to say for himself. All he has is the mercy of God. And that's what he finds as he rests after death in the bosom of Abraham.

In our creed we remind ourselves that the day is ahead of us that he shall come to judge the quick and dead – it would sound almost like a threat or at least a call to get busy justifying ourselves. Padding our resume. Impressing the judge. But for us pilgrims on the way to the New Jerusalem we know that the only thing we could ever say for ourselves is like the publican and like the beggar, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”