

“What Happens When We Are Content to Simply Be Ourselves?”

Luke 18: 9-14

This week we come back to the Gospel of Luke and we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. This is probably not one of Luke’s more well-known parables but that simple fact doesn’t stop it from being one of Luke’s more powerful stories. We hear this parable and immediately we can imagine the scene. And probably within just the first couple of lines, we also know the “moral of the story”.

One man poses and prays at the altar while another man can’t even turn his eyes towards heaven.

On the surface, this parable seems so straightforward. We can almost hear Jesus telling us, “Don’t be like the Pharisee. Be like the tax collector.” End of story, right? Simple enough, right?

But before we can leave the story, Jesus brings us back with a “I want to talk for a bit” and we realize that there may be more to this story than what we first assumed. We should know by now that Luke is always telling us there is more than one way to read his Gospel especially when Jesus is holding a teaching moment for the disciples. So we come back to the story and we take a second look.

And when we do, we discover that things are not as cut and dry as we would have like to have made them. Sure, we were on the right track with our first assumption about the “moral of the story” but we also need to dig a little deeper.

At first glance, the Pharisee is what he appears to be-arrogant, rude, and yes, self-righteous. He seems to be bragging about what all he does for the Temple. He seems to be passing judgment on his fellow believers, believers that just don't quite come up to his standard. Really at first glance, the Pharisee appears to be asking God to confirm what he already holds as truth: He is the one who is doing what is right. Everyone else is wrong. He knows he is a good person of faith and God should be thankful for all that the Pharisee does around here.

The “I” statements just keep flowing out of the Pharisee's mouth. The “me” attitude is very evident in all he does. So in response, we do want to say to Luke and Jesus, can you blame us for thinking this guy is the bad guy in the story.

Except when Jesus and Luke invite us to take another look, we realize that we may not know the whole story that surrounds the Pharisee. We may not know what's going on in his life. We may not know exactly why he decided to come to the Temple that day in the first place. All we get in this story is a little glimpse and we make a snap decision based on just that one glimpse.

Maybe what's really going on is that the Pharisee is truly praying an honest prayer. Maybe he gets that he is blessed. Maybe he realizes that unlike some

others, somehow, in some strange stroke of luck, all he has experienced in life are the good things. And maybe he knows that he didn't do anything to deserve them. Maybe he realizes that's the funny thing about God's grace. We can't earn it and so to show his appreciation, his thankfulness, his overwhelmed heart, he thinks he should go above and beyond just what is required of him by the Law and double, triple his efforts to show his gratitude to God.

As the possibilities of the broader picture begin to sink in, we find ourselves saying, "Okay, Luke. We get it." Maybe we should cut the Pharisee a little slack. Maybe we don't know the Pharisee's whole story but surely we were right about the tax collector. Give us some credit. We've heard stories about how Jesus ministered to tax collectors, showed them mercy when no one else will. We even know that Jesus said that the tax collector went home made right with God. Surely we were right in our assumption about the tax collector...except we realize that once again, we only get a glimpse of the tax collector in this story. And once again, we made some snap decisions based on just a few facts.

Now, we weren't wrong in saying that Jesus hung out with tax collectors and other sinners. And we weren't wrong when we said that the tax collectors were despised. They were a part of the overall system, a system that oppressed people, that empowered the Roman Empire.

And yes, we even weren't wrong that the tax collector did ask for forgiveness except that usually when forgiveness is granted, there is a change of behavior, something we certainly don't know if that change of behavior happened. Do we know if this tax collector's life was really changed, that maybe he decided to leave his line of work, work that oppressed, work that lifted up the powerful and kept the poor down? Do we know if the tax collector gave back the money he may have earned or in some cases, stole as part of that act of forgiveness?

We don't get any answers to our questions because all we get is a glimpse, a moment in time that involves the tax collector. And we begin to wonder if there is a possibility that the tax collector just asked for forgiveness without changing a single thing? Sort of like he begins treating God's grace as a revolving door, just keep asking, just keep getting forgiven, without ever having to step out of the pattern.

Once again, we just get a glimpse of the story and we make a snap decision based on just a few facts of information. So where do these glimpses leave us? Where do we go from here? Is this just going to be another sermon that tells us not to judge other people? Well, not just that. That's part of it But there is something more going on in this story as well. Jesus tells us to not walk around with our nose up in the air. (That's the whole no judging part) but he doesn't end there. He goes on to say, "be content to simply be ourselves." This story becomes a call for us not

to judge others but it also becomes an opportunity for us to not judge ourselves as well, to not stand in front of the mirror and say I wish I was prettier or I wish I was younger. It becomes an opportunity for us to not judge based on some outside information as well, like when we look at a friend's life and say, I wish I had their life. They have it so easy."

And yes, the story even becomes a call for us to realize that the opposite is true as well. As we become more content with ourselves, we can't also simply say to all those times when we see someone, maybe angry, maybe arrogant, maybe downright rude, "Well, thank God I'm not like that person." Or my personal favorite, because as much as I hate to admit it, this words have come out of my mouth, You know, "Well, I may not be perfect but at least I'm not like so and so...I'll let you fill in the blank on that one. I know that I certainly have, probably more times than I would like to admit.

Really this story, this parable challenges us to really become content with ourselves and with others, the good, the bad and yes, the ugly.

Now when I say content, I don't mean settle. I don't mean keep the status quo. Content means happy, means coming to a place of peace and acceptance. And sometimes to get to that place of peace, with ourselves and with others, we have do to some hard work. It can be going somewhere where it is all uphill, both ways. To get to that place of being content, we may have to do some soul searching. We

certainly have to do some non judging and we definitely have to look for the image of God in others and in ourselves, no matter how hard it may be to do sometimes.

It certainly sounds easy enough, but that's where it's deceiving. It is usually the easy stuff that is the hardest to do and live out.

As people of faith, We must embrace the image of God in others and well as embracing that same thing in ourselves as well. It requires us to look at how we speak to one another; interact with one another as well as take a look at how we speak about ourselves and treat ourselves. It is a both and kind of deal.

Let me explain: As one commentator shared, she saw this phenomenon each and every day as she worked as a college chaplain. She would constantly have students coming in seeking guidance and usually more often than not, their conversations would turn to how to improve one's life. And always, the commentator would say, never fail, always the student would say, "I want to grow in my relationship with God." Sounds good right but that one statement was so frustrating for this chaplain because the student would follow up that comment with "Yeah, I need to pray more, read the Bible more, do more spiritual disciplines, go to church more. That's what I need to do to grow in my relationship with God."

But the chaplain wanted the student to think beyond just the basics of fact and wanted the student to go a little farther out of his or her comfort zone. So she

would say, “Is there someone who you need to forgive? Or is there someone you have hurt and need to go and ask forgiveness? She would also ask, “Is there some relationship in your life that is broken and needs healing” Or “is there something you can do to bring healing to others?”

The chaplain shared that when she asked these questions, most of the students would look at her dumbfounded and give her this “What do you mean” kind of look? By asking these questions, the chaplain was trying to get the student to look beyond the obvious and see the wider picture. Our faith is not just made up of prayers, or bible reading. Our relationship with God is not just made up of just going to church or doing spiritual disciplines each day. Our relationship with God is a both and situation. It requires us to do the easy work and the hard work. It requires us to open the Bible, read the stories, and realize that we are called to be in community with one another. But it doesn’t stop just there. With this realization about community, healing and wholeness can happen when we truly embrace this notion of community. And then once that idea sinks in, we begin to realize that there are broken parts in our own lives, in our own relationships that need fixing as well. Our words, our prayers, our Bible readings and our acts of compassion, our acts of healing, our acts of wholeness, our acts of community all build upon one another and feed one another.

The chaplain shared that she knew that the students were trying to figure out how to be more Christ like in their own lives and she was hoping to make them realize that Jesus showed us exactly how to do that, through his words and his actions. Yes there were prayers, bible study, and going to church but Jesus also showed us how by being in relationship with people. And as people of faith, Jesus also showed us that we can't be in true relationship with people if we are only going to make snap decisions about them based on just one interaction or just a few facts of information.

Which brings us back to the parable. We don't know if the Pharisee's prayer was just words or if they were more, if they were a call to action, a way of reminding himself how grateful he is to God. And the same holds true for the tax collector. Was his ask of mercy just an empty action or were they heart felt words. We'll never know but both show us that it is both our actions and works that begin the process of becoming content with ourselves and with one another. Our faith is made up of both words and actions just like in the parable.

We are called to be content with who we are, with who each other is as well. I'm not saying for us to settle or become complacent but content, to come to a place of peace and acceptance. Because once we can do that, we will have been transformed into the people that God created us to be. We will have been

transformed into Body of Christ that God created us to be. We will begin acting like the people God calls us to be.

Really all of the Bible, all of our faith, all of our Christian tradition can be boiled down to one phrase that will easily fit on a bumper sticker: “God loves you, so start living out that love in your life and underneath in parentheses it would also say “And stop being a jerk!”

We are all called to be the person we actually are in the presence of God, content to be ourselves, embracing that we are made in the image of God, transformed into the person God created us to be.

It truly is that simple and yes, it truly is that hard.

We all make snap decisions about people we interact with daily. We judge them based on 5 minutes of information. WE condemn them or stereotype them based on just a few facts without knowing their whole story. And if we are being truly honest, we know that we also only half listen to what the other person is saying most of the time and we often take what they say out of context.

The fact of the matter is we can't see the image of God in others until we can see it in ourselves. The fact of the matter is we also know that we can't see the image of God in others in just five minutes of interaction either. We need to see the larger picture. We need to know their story.

Our faith is made up of both word and action. That's what helps us begin the process of becoming content with who we are as well as becoming content with others. It is about doing the easy work and the hard work of faith: praying, reading the bible, going to church, being in relationship with one another. I'm just going to let you figure out what is the easy part and what is the hard part because true be told, it changes daily.

As people of faith, our calling is see the larger picture, and interact with one another. Our calling is to simply be content with our selves and with others, not settle but come to a place of peace and acceptance. Yes, it truly is that easy. And yes, it truly is that hard.

It seems we have our work cut out for us as people of faith. And it's the only way we can become the people God created us to be. It's the only way to become the people God calls us to be.

I don't know what that process will look like for you and I'm not sure I know what that process looks like for me but I do know that if we embrace this calling together, we can become more than we could ever imagine.

Sure Seems like something worth working towards and for together..
May we continue the process of becoming content until all are made right with God. Amen.