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Luke 18:9-14

Our Private Lives

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Luke 18:9-14 Common English Bible

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.”

I often replay conversations that I have had. Do you do that? I think of what I would have said differently or how I would have reacted differently. About 15 years ago I was new in ministry and I had a conversation that I still think about. Someone came into my office to talk and they revealed something that surprised me. I thought of this person as having it all together, they always looked great, they had a beautiful family, they had a successful job, and they revealed to me that they were a compulsive spender. They spent money that their family did not have, they had massive credit card debt, they had creditors calling them, and they didn’t know what to do. From that conversation I learned that I never know completely what is going on in someone’s life. Around that time someone shared with me that they had been going to Alcoholics Anonymous their entire life and I had no idea. So, now when you come to my office, I try not to be surprised at least outwardly when someone shares their deepest secrets with me. We all have secrets. We all have things that we keep hidden because we are embarrassed or ashamed or filled with guilt.

Everyone has a story. And sometimes that story is a scar. When I think about the good news of the Gospel, it is always stories. When we embrace our story, when we embrace our scars, when we embrace our mess, it becomes our message and it becomes the good news.

In our scripture today we are overhearing the secret prayers of two people. One is a Pharisee. Pharisees are good, righteous people. A Pharisee gave a tenth of their income to charity. A Pharisee was very disciplined, even more so than was required by law. The other person is a tax collector. Tax collectors were known for being crooked and not honest. They took more money than they needed to and were considered to be in the same category as a thief.

When they pray, the Pharisee thinks only of himself; his giving to the church, his fasting for prayer, and so on. He wanted God to know how good he was. When the tax collector prays he has sincere confession. He is so filled with guilt that he can’t even lift his eyes up to heaven. He keeps pounding his breast and he isn’t really praying, he is crying. He pleads with God to show mercy to him. He is more focused on God, than on himself. He is so vulnerable and honest with God. It is when we are most vulnerable and open to connection that we are able to see each other authentically and as rooted in God.

The Pharisee looks at this vulnerability and he can’t handle it. He sees himself as better than the tax collector. The Pharisee went low when the tax collector went high. He made himself taller by pulling the tax collector down.

There is something that I love about the Bible. Whenever folks are feeling lost and alone and afraid, they remind themselves of God’s faithfulness by telling the story again and again of how God has been with them. In order to trust God’s faithfulness we have to remind ourselves of God’s faithfulness. When Jesus gets a hold of us we see things upside down and we begin to be blessed by things that we didn’t realize were blessings.

I can totally see myself praying the prayer that the Pharisee did. I am so glad that I am not like this guy! And I am hiding behind this comparison. I don’t have to look at myself if I am constantly comparing myself to others. But I pray because prayer changes me. Nadia Bolz-Weber wonders about prayer. She says, “Maybe prayer isn’t the way in which we manipulate God but is simply the posture in which we finally become worn down by God’s persistence—God’s persistence in loving us. God’s persistence in forgiving and being known. And God’s persistence in being faithful and always, always, always bringing life out of death.”[[1]](#footnote-2) I pray because it is an inward act that helps me remember that God is first in my life.

I read my Bible because it helps me remember that God uses my story. I give money to the church because I want to help fund the church and feed the poor and invest in missions, but I also give to the church because it is an inward act that releases me from my number one idol, money. When I tithe, I put God first. I give because I love God more than I love money.

I love people because when I treat everyone as children of God, made in God’s image, then I remind myself that I am a child of God, made in God’s image. The last few weeks sexual assault has been in the news. After the tape of the conversation in the bus with a candidate aired, phone calls to the country’s biggest sexual assault hotline jumped 33%.[[2]](#footnote-3) They had to bring in additional staff and ask their other staff to stay for longer hours as people were calling in distress over memories unearthed or with experiences of verbal and physical sexual assault finally being articulated.

A few weeks ago writer Kelly Oxford wrote on Twitter about her experience of sexual assault and she asked other women to share their stories. Within one evening she received one million responses. One million. Women are created by God, but too often women are demeaned and their God given humanity is dismissed and women are seen as public property. October is Domestic Violence Awareness month. Genesis Women’s Shelter shares some things that I thought were helpful. When someone shares about their abuse with you, believe them. Let them know that what is happening is not okay and that you will support them. Let them know that it is not their fault and that they have done nothing wrong. Help them get support by letting them know about places that can help like Genesis Women’s Shelter.

A few weeks ago on World Communion Sunday we talked about how it is our job to dismantle the idol of whiteness as superior. It is our job to dismantle the idol of maleness as superior as well. In this place we are called to listen to the stories of pain that so many women carry over past experiences. In this place we are called to work so that all of our children know that they are deeply valued and loved. We are called as Christians to speak up when something demeaning is said. We are called as Christians to speak of God in ways that are as inclusive and expansive as God is.

What is God bothering you about today? How is God challenging you to allow God’s compassion to reorder the priorities of your life?

We experienced the last of the presidential debates last Wednesday night. And whether you were incensed by the nasty woman comment or enflamed by the revelations found in wikileaks information or just want it all over with, we know in our heart of hearts that these people have secrets because we all have secrets. We know these candidates seeking the highest office have flaws and there are things they want to keep from us. So know you are in good, even great company, when you acknowledge your secrets. You can keep secrets from me, or from the people closest to you, but I urge you, let God “in on” those secrets. You won't be sorry.

The trick in all of this is to not lose sight of God’s mercy. We can be honest with God about the ways that we fall short without beating ourselves up. We see our brokenness clearly and we see it in the light of God’s love for us. God moves in us and through us even though we mess up every single day. God’s grace flows through us, and the more we open ourselves up to that grace, the more we let go of our mistakes and our fears, then we become more fully the people that God creates us to be. We see ourselves as God sees us, as God’s beloved child with whom God is well pleased.

1. http://sojo.net/articles/prayer-and-persistent-widow [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.npr.org/2016/10/14/497911796/trump-allegations-of-sexual-misconduct-spur-calls-to-assault-honlines [↑](#footnote-ref-3)