

THE PARABLES OF JESUS: III - "IT'S ALL ABOUT ME"

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September 25, 2011

Christian Education Sunday

Luke 18:9-17

One day a man went to see his doctor for a routine visit. While he was there, he told the doctor how perplexed he was by his wife's refusal to admit she had a hearing problem. In frustration, he asked the doctor, "How can I get my wife to admit that she is hard of hearing?"

"Well," the doctor replied, "I'll tell you what you need to do. When you get home tonight, peek your head through the door and say, 'Hi, honey. What's for dinner tonight?' If she doesn't answer, go into the living room and say again, 'Honey, what's for dinner?' If she still doesn't hear you, walk into the kitchen and ask her, and then if she still hasn't answered you, walk right up behind her and speak directly in her ear. 'Honey, what's for dinner?' Then you will be able to convince her of her need for a hearing exam."

"Great," the man said. "I'll give it a try."

So he went home, went in the front door, and just as he had been instructed, called out to his wife, "Hi honey, what's for dinner tonight?" He listened carefully,

but no reply. So he went into the living room and tried again. “Honey, what’s for dinner tonight?” Still nothing.

So he went into the kitchen, and tried a third time. “Honey, what’s for dinner?” Nothing. Finally, he got right behind his wife and spoke directly into her ear, “Honey, what’s for dinner?” At which point, his wife turned around and sharply said, “For the *fourth* time, I said we’re having spaghetti!”

(Brian Bauknight, *Devotions to Leave You Smiling*, p. 96)

Cute story, huh? But it has within it a kernel of truth that speaks to this morning’s Gospel lesson. And it is this: that we so very easily are so quick to see things in others and not look at ourselves.

Let’s go back to the lesson that Jesus tells. One day a Pharisee and a tax collector are both in the temple praying. The Pharisee lifts up his prayers to God extolling all of his virtues, and putting down people he knows don’t hold a candle to him. The tax collector, on the other hand, couldn’t even bring himself to look up to heaven as he prayed, he simply bared his sin sick soul before God.

I would imagine that the Pharisee, and I know the ones who were listening to Jesus, were shocked to hear him praise the tax collector instead of him. How could

he praise the tax collector? Didn't Jesus know about tax collectors in that day and time - how they pocketed a lot of the money for themselves - how they were just about as good as thieves? And Jesus praised him?

Didn't he see the Pharisee being the ultimate religious man? Studying the law day and night, fasting twice a week, giving a tenth of his income, a tithe to the Lord.

It didn't make sense. He didn't get it. They didn't get it. And they didn't get it, because they were asking the wrong questions, looking at the wrong qualifications. Jesus wasn't saying that the tax collector was doing good things, and he didn't say that the Pharisee was not doing good things. It wasn't about that, at all.

At that moment, at that time, Jesus was talking about their relationship to God, and what he saw was the Pharisee trying to earn God's love and the tax collector throwing himself upon the unmerited, unearned grace of God. The tax collector got it - he got that it's not about comparing yourself to someone else - it's all about you and God.

It's a losing proposition to puff yourself up or compare yourself to someone else when it comes to faith and a relationship with God.

Did you ever hear that classic story about the cold-natured turtle who wanted so badly to go to Florida for the winter? He had no way to get there, until he came up with a brilliant idea. He had two wild geese friends who were about to fly off to Florida, and he figured he could get a long piece of string, have each goose take an end, while he with his strong jaws would hold on the string in the middle.

Well, they agreed to do it and off they flew to Florida. Somewhere along the way, they passed over a field where the farmer stood looking up at them in amazement. He shouted out, “What a creative idea! That’s wonderful! That’s ingenious! Who in the world invented that?” The turtle, filled with pride and anxious to take credit where credit was due, opened his mouth to say, “I did!” and when he opened his mouth, of course, he let go of the string. And that old farmer had some good turtle soup for dinner!

(James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It,* p. 20)

That turtle learned what the Pharisee in the parable learned. It’s a dangerous thing to be so focused on yourself, so anxious to boast of your accomplishments. And when it comes to faith, especially, it’s a losing proposition, it’s fruitless. Because with God, it’s not about choosing one person over another,

God has enough love to go around.

So instead of comparing ourselves to others, or boasting about who we are and what we've done, on this Christian Education Sunday, I want to suggest to you that this parable invites us instead to concentrate on our own relationship with God. Which is why I called this sermon, "It's All About Me." For once, that's not a bad phrase. In this instance, what I mean is that, when it comes to our faith, we don't have to dwell on others, we need to be concerned about ourselves and our own relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

So instead of pointing out the status of another's faith, perhaps the first question we need to ask ourselves is one that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, always encouraged people to ask themselves: How is it with your soul? Really, how is it with your soul?

Are you continually seeking to grow in your faith? Are you taking the time, making the time to spend in prayer, study, meditation? Have you moved beyond learning about God, to knowing God, and always seeking to know Him better?

None of that will happen without you being intentional about it. It's like anything else, it won't happen unless you make it happen. Too often, we have too many excuses for not giving time to intentional faith development. We're going to

do it, but we never really do it. We want to do it, but our schedules are just so jam-packed already.

One young woman, when asked how she was able to “fit” intentional faith development into her life, said this: I realized after I really looked at it, that “I manage to do other things on time - go to the gym, take children to school and to soccer practice, eat, work. I look at my Bible study as a support group a regular appointment with God’s grace. I make it a priority, as if keeping an appointment with God.” (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, p. 69)

You see what she’s saying? We make room for everything else important in our lives, so I guess the question is, is growing closer to God important in your life? If it is, you’ll make time for it. If it’s not, you won’t.

But let me tell you something, if you do, it can change your life. It can change your whole perspective on life. Bishop Robert Schnase, in his wonderful book on which I preached last year, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, says this about it. “The fruit of Intentional Faith Development is not merely to know more about God, but to know God, to see through the idea of God to God Himself. Spiritual knowledge arises in us in mysterious ways. A memorable insight is mulled over and replayed dozens of times during the week that follows a Bible study. We think of it as we wait at a stoplight on the way to the grocery store, it

comes to mind as we ride the subway to work, it surfaces during a staff meeting at the office or during dinner with family. Spiritual knowledge is not information we apply to a problem like a number we plug into a formula that solves everything. Rather, a new awareness takes root, a new perception is formed, a new confidence is discovered, a new connection made, or a new hope recovered that changes how we think, feel and act. (Ibid, p. 75)

Through intentional faith development, as one writer put it, you take hold of the Bible, and then, you let it take hold of you. And when you do, you let God into your life in a new way, a growing way.

And when you do that, you'll make the greatest discovery of all (one that we hope the Pharisee finally learned). And it is this: "It's Not All You."

Let me explain by way of a little story. "A distinguished professor taught at the University of Chicago. Quite often, his preschool granddaughter would come to visit him at his office. She loved to reach up and hold his hand and walk around the campus with her grandfather. One day, the man was carrying his granddaughter around on his shoulders. They met a friend who had seen the little girl just the week before. The friend looked up at the little girl riding on her grandfather's shoulders and, with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes, said to her, 'My goodness! Look at you! Look at how much you've grown since I saw

you last week!’ The little girl replied, ‘Not all of this is me.’”

(James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p. 53)

Those are the words that all of us can say when it comes to our faith - not all of this is me. But we can only say it when we have matured in faith enough to be humble like the tax collector. We can only say it when we realize it is but for the grace of God that we are who we are, and it is but by the grace of God that we are saved. When we continually seek to grow in our relationship with God, we come to that place where we say “not all of this is me - I’m fully relying on God.”

My dear friends, I hope on this Christian Education Sunday, that if you are not spending the time you need to spend growing closer to Christ, that you make the choice to change. Growing in Christ takes more than just coming to worship, it takes intentional effort on your part.

I’m going to close with some very challenging words set forth by Bishop Gene Robinson. I hope they will really make you think about where you are, and where you want to be in your relationship with God. He writes: “You know how an inoculation works? You don’t want to get chicken pox, so you go to the doctor, and they give you just enough chicken pox to make your body form antibodies to it, so you never get a full-blown case of chicken pox. God help us (he says) if we come

here on Sunday mornings just to get enough religion to keep us from having a full-blown case. It is so easy, isn't it, to come here, isn't it? It feels so good, and you see people you know, and the music's great, and the preaching is good. It just all works! But if we leave here, and it causes us to not do anything any differently, then this is nothing but a religious theme park. Really! We have to be out there doing the work that God has given us to do, or else it is all ultimately just self-serving." (On-line, Bishop Gene Robinson, "The Good Samaritan")

And I would add we have to be, each of us, working on our relationship with God. I pray that you and I, with the humility and honesty of the tax collector, will go forth from this place continually seeking to grow as disciples of Christ, not just to know about Jesus, but to know Him. May it be so.

Amen.