

What Can Honesty Make Possible?

What can honesty make possible? Drawing on our scripture readings from today, we will wonder and I think we will find that honesty will bring forth receptivity and generosity and, ideally, more of itself – what God is truly looking for in us – honesty.

As we, a congregation, are gathered today in our beloved church building, built and loved by our ancestors in faith on land that has been in relationship with the Wahpekute Dakota people and other First Nations peoples for millennia before us, let us pray. God, as you have gathered us together, we long for you to grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Today's reading from the gospel of Luke opened in this way: *“Jesus spoke this parable addressed to those who believed in their own self-righteousness while holding everyone else in contempt.”*

Would you like to soften the words self-righteous and contemptuous? Jesus is addressing his parable to us as plainly as he addressed it to some of his contemporaries. We sometime (or maybe often) find ourselves lacking in empathy toward those who think and believe differently than we do. I believe that receptivity is a core aspect of living ways that are faithful. Through prayer, the love of God receives our words, our stillness, and our energy. We receive Love's energy, stillness and (every once in a while) Love's words burrowing into our cognition. Receptivity looks like sheer openness in those moments when we pause to be fully present; offering up our words, our stillness, our energy. How might you cultivate a way of receptivity to the voice of God speaking through another with whom you intersect?

Perhaps, like me, you have learned about active listening during some part of your formal education or job training. An active listener leans in toward their conversation partner and attempts to stay receptive in the present moment – listening with full attention to the other without summoning their own response while the other is still speaking.

What undergirds a receptive posture? Self-righteousness and contempt are attitudes whose opposite might be empathy. Empathy (compassion, responsiveness, and understanding) can be difficult to develop. It requires space. I find that a receptive, empathetic posture toward another requires a profound sense of spaciousness.

Through the United Church of Christ, a body with which our congregation is covenanting in the coming year along with maintaining our affiliation with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, we are part of the progressive Christian tradition. We believe that we should never place a period where God has placed a comma because God who is still speaking through our lives and through our sacred texts. We believe in a God who is liberator of the oppressed. We take stands for justice.

And every day, each of us must show up to the challenge of a balance between standing on the side of radically inclusive and liberating love and practicing the spaciousness necessary to join in conversation with those whose convictions differ from our own.

Let's turn to the gospel reading for today. Stories are powerful. Knowing that, Jesus often taught in parables.

Scholar Marjorie Procter-Smith has written a commentary on this parable that emphasizes the importance of our spacious understanding how first century Pharisees and tax collectors tended to interact within their society.

Procter-Smith writes, *“Pharisees and tax collectors have become biblical stock figures to us. The self-righteous, rule-bound religious leader, lacking in compassion and insight, is contrasted with the repentant, meek, simple, and humble tax collector.”*

She contrasts those caricatures, then, that we’ve made of first-century Pharisees and tax collectors with how they actually interacted in society. Procter-Smith went on to write, *“Pharisees held to a liberal interpretation of Scripture, and the aim of Pharisaic law was to make observance of Torah available to all. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were seen as collaborators with the hated Romans. Far from being simple, they were seen to be (and sometimes were) venal, unscrupulous, and dishonest.”*

Knowing more about their first century reputations of their group identities and with a spacious posture toward their individual experiences, let’s hear the parable again:

“Two people went up to the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed like this: ‘I give you thanks, O God, that I’m not like others—greedy, crooked, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn.’ The other one, however, kept a distance, not even daring to look up to heaven. In real humility, all the tax collector said, was, ‘O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ Believe me, the tax collector went home from the Temple right with God, while the Pharisee didn’t. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

What was each of these people communicating to God? What posture did each of them take? I sense the Pharisee with inward arms cross crossed in defense, barricading his spirit from receiving or offering love.

I sense the tax collector with inward openness to his spirit receiving and offering love. His posture of receptivity made way for his honesty of conviction and expression.

The Rev. Kathryn Matthews retired from serving at the national setting of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland. She has written: *“If we, too, come before God in humble openness and fervent trust in God's goodness, we make room for God to work in our lives. That is much closer to righteousness than all the good works we can manage. Honesty in prayer flows from openness: an open heart, an open mind, a life opened to God and to transformation. Such humble and trusting prayer helps us to discover who we are, and who God is: merciful and loving and just.”* Words of wisdom from the Rev. Kathryn Matthews.

Today is my annual opportunity to invite us into a posture of openness and receptivity in order to be honest with ourselves about our capacity to offer our financial support to our ministries along with our energies and presence together. If I've shared this story once, I've shared it a dozen or more times. In my childhood, our parents had a mason jar for each of the three children in our home. And in each mason jar were three recycled business envelopes, each labeled with sharpie: church, save, spend. And our rule (thinking of how we were speaking of rules with the children earlier) was that we needed to give of our allowance (say, ten dollars per week) ten percent to the church envelope, fifty percent to the save envelope, and forty percent that we could spend.

Now, my expenditures have changed over the course of my adolescence and young adulthood. But I sure honor the efforts of parents to being speaking with children about money, finances, capacity from an early time.

And I want to share with you a bit about my honest approach toward my financial giving. And so, I hold in my hand crumpled, ruffled papers (that apparently began in 2009) on which I determined how I would give away as close to ten percent of my income as possible each year. What I have come to understand is the modern tithe – the possibility of giving five percent of my income to my local congregation and all of our efforts that I believe in and to give as much as five percent away to other organizations doing meaningful, life-affirming, life-giving work.

And so, my largest commitment every year is to see the work of our church and give six to seven percent of my income back to the ministries of our church. For me, that means something between \$4,000 and \$4,500 each year that I give to our church.

And then I have the creativity to wonder, where else am I trusting? Where else am I being made more alive by the work being done. And so, this year, my second largest gift (which was much smaller) was to the work my sister is doing as a pediatrician among refugees currently in Pakistan. To me, that is life-giving, honest, life-affirming work.

Each year, I give to groups that really matter to me and really push the needle forward for justice and love. My next largest each year (which are very small) go to the Lowe Syndrome Association to fund research and support for boys and men like my Sam, living with Lowe Syndrome; to the Minnesota Conference UCC, which supports vitality and mutuality among our 120 congregations; to Minnesota Public Radio, because they support my efforts to stay informed about current events – which in turn informs my ministry among you; and to Planned Parenthood for life-affirming work in support of women's health. And there are about ten other organizations that get one hundred dollars or so.

And so I need to be honest with myself about where is my capacity and what organizations are pushing forward toward love and justice. I invite you also to discern how to give to our congregation and other places in 2023 – to give until it feels. Not to give until it hurts, but to give until you feel your investment wherever life is being affirmed and supported. What will be a meaningful “Intention to Give” to our congregation for you this year? Our leaders will finalize the 2023 budget in coming weeks based on what we can expect to give to support our ministries.

There are so many ways to begin the journey toward deeper and deeper honesty. Sometimes it is to determine whether I can give just a bit more in the coming year, or if I need to scale back, or need to stay the same on a gift. It’s also obviously important to me to think about a percentage somehow – the biblical idea of the tithe or the modern tithe. And so I invite you to be honest with yourselves and to give yourself time and space to consider it fully.

Let’s end this time of reflection by seeing the end of that gospel story as well as returning to the reading from Sirach.

We heard in the gospel of Luke, *“People even brought their infants forward for Jesus to touch. When the disciples saw this, they scolded the parents. ‘Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. The truth is, whoever doesn’t welcome the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.’”* Jesus moved in such countercultural ways. In that time and space, children were the lowest on the social order in every way. They were the least powerful, the least honored. And yet, Jesus saw that they were the way to know what matters, what’s possible.

Hear again to the prophetic words about people coming from the margins in Sirach. Here is an excerpt:

“God listens to the prayers of those who are exploited. God will never ignore the pleas of the orphan or of those who are widowed, as they pour out their heart... To be accepted, you must give of yourself as God requires—then your prayer will reach the clouds. The prayer of the unpretentious pierces the clouds.”

May we learn from those who are least among us in terms of brokering traditional forms of power how to be really powerful. May we learn from the youngest and the least what matters most and what is most possible.

Let us return to the heart of love through our honesty. And I invite you (if you wish) to close your eyes and hear again an excerpt from the Psalm with which we opened our worship singing and have continued singing throughout the service. Hear the words of the psalmist spoken directly to your life and the possibilities you hold.

*“How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of hosts!...
My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God...
Happy are those whose strength is in you...
As [we] go through the valley of Baca [weeping],
[We] make it a place of springs...
[We] go from strength to strength...”*

Friends, may we be radically receptive, generous, honest beloved embodi-ers of God’s love because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
November 13, 2022 (23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Sirach 35: 13b-18, Psalm 84: 1-7, Luke 18: 9-17