

Emotionally Honest Faith

As we move into a time of reflection, we recognize the gift it is to be freely gathered for worship – both on the live stream and on this land that has been loved by First Nations and others throughout time and where we are now weaving our way of community. I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a moment of prayer – closing your eyes if that helps to ground you in this moment.

Spirit of God, we need your love to challenge us today. Kindle in us sacred discomfort that leads us into loving action. And we need your love to comfort us. Remind us in this hour that we are enough and that your possibilities will find us. We ask this as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

Why do I want to preach this morning? Why do I want to share good news with you this morning? During a recent reading retreat as part of my continuing education, I was drawn to read a book that has been waiting for me – *Backstory Preaching* by Rev. Lisa Cressman. Lisa grew up at nearby Ascension Episcopal Church in Stillwater. As a priest, her calling has developed into one of encouraging preachers of all stripes toward what her subtitle says: *Integrating Life, Spirituality, and Craft*. Lisa hope that preachers will less often find themselves asking ‘Why should I preach this next Sunday?’ and more often ‘Why do I want to preach this next Sunday?’ She invites preachers to recognize as good news what a scripture reading conveys about who or what God is along the human journey.

I find this good news in today’s reading from the gospel according to Luke: Through practicing emotional honesty, we can deepen and strengthen our grounding in the love of God. It is from our mooring in that space of deepening faith, assured of our belovedness, that teacher and psychotherapist James Finley writes, “...then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love.”

Now, the editor of the book of Luke provides this explanation for Jesus' motivation in sharing a particular parable with the crowd: "*[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*" Who among us can say we've never held a posture of sheer self-sufficiency, self-righteousness and even contempt? I feel these words sting with the precision of reality. We might wish we could soften the words self-sufficient, self-righteous, contempt - without becoming less than truthful.

Jesus is addressing his parable to us as plainly as he addressed it to some of his contemporaries. In a search through my preaching files, I found that I last preached about this parable on the eve of the 2016 presidential election. At that time, I shared this thought: What better timing for Jesus to speak to us about self-sufficiency, self-righteousness and contempt than during this presidential election season, when we sometime (or maybe often) find ourselves lacking in empathy toward those who think and believe differently than we do. Well, nine years later, we live in a nation that seems blanketed in some sort of terrible rubber cement of hostile divisiveness.

Before we consider the parable from our own present-day lens, let's understand the societal context in which Jesus and his original audience lived. Scholar Marjorie Procter-Smith has written a commentary on this parable that emphasizes the importance of our understanding how first century Pharisees and tax collectors tended to interact within their society. We will also do well to recognize that we have been building assumptions and stereotypes about them ever since. 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 the caricatures we've made of first-century Pharisees and tax collectors with how they actually interacted in society, writing: *"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. Avoiding these overly familiar stereotypes... get[ting] beyond [our] own assumptions about these characters, is important in order to hear the parable with new ears."* End of quote from Marjorie Procter-Smith.

Recognizing that people have always tried to assign these persons particular ethical characteristics based on their stations in life, let us listen with open hearts as Jesus' audience in this time and space.

"The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people... I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'"

Do you sense that thankfulness is really what the Pharisee was feeling? To be thankful means to be pleased or glad, conscious of having received a benefit. If the heart of God was listening (and I think it was), was God absorbing an honest expression of this person's state of heart and spirit? Or might he have actually felt something other than thankful receptivity as he went about his due diligence of prayer from his station of privilege and in proximity to someone who seemed to be visibly struggling?

"But the tax collector, standing far off... was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"

Jesus declared that the tax collector would depart from that moment of confession and longing newly justified (that is, declared good – restored in his relationship with a gracious God by way of humble, emotionally honest faith.

Let's wonder together about emotional honesty in our own lives. I'd like to share with you a few snippets of the wonderful article that Heather read for us. It is available – I'd be happy to share it with anyone who would like to read it in full again for themselves. We heard this from Nicholas Jenner:

"We would rather defend our dishonesty on the grounds that it [that is, emotional honesty] might hurt others; and having rationalized our phoniness into nobility, we settle for superficial relationships." Now, that was the author's quote from Johnn Powell in the book, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*

I wonder: **Against whom (meaning, in counter to the deepening of what relationship) might you be defending your emotional dishonesty?** Could you become less defensive? We also heard:

"By being emotionally dishonest, we are missing out on connection with others and indeed ourselves. We are missing out on living an authentic life [when] we hide and lie about what we are truly feeling."

He speaks of two ways of connection. So I wonder: **In what aspect of your internal experience are you missing out on deeper connection with yourself due to your emotional dishonesty with yourself?** And I wonder: **With whom are you missing out on a deepening interpersonal connection due to emotional dishonesty?**

Why do we practice emotional dishonesty? So, again, I want to tap into the author. We hear, *"Firstly, we fear judgment and criticism from others and it is easier to avoid that. Secondly, we have become adept at manipulating our feelings, subduing them, and hiding them in order to control the response from others."*

I wonder: **In the relationship in which you too often practice emotional dishonesty, why is that?** I invite us to take from today a wondering about why we are emotionally dishonest with those with whom we share care.

And one last piece from Nicholas Jenner. It bears repeating because experiences vary widely. He writes:

“Being emotionally honest means recognizing and accepting when you are being defensive, for example, or hiding what you are truly wanting to say... Emotional intelligence may also give us the ability to decide when it is in our best interest to be emotionally honest by sharing our real feelings. There are times when it is not healthy or safe for us to be emotionally honest.”

Let us be sure to be gracious with ourselves and others as we seek the spaces where we can practice emotional honesty in ways that will be received and shared with love.

Let’s bring our reflection to a close by noticing the emotional honesty Jesus witnessed in children. We heard:

“But Jesus called for them and said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not stop them... [W]hoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’”

Isn’t receptivity a core aspect of emotionally honest faith? Vulnerable openness. Through an emotionally receptive posture, the love of God receives our words, our stillness, and our energy. We receive God’s energy, stillness and – every once in a while – a word from God’s love burrowing into our cognition.

Grace works through these moments of sheer openness when we pause to be present with God, offering up our words, our stillness, our energy.

Let’s strive with grace toward emotional honesty, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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“Emotional Honesty: What It Is and Why It Is Important,” Luke 18:9-17