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Luke 18:9-14, Parables from the Underside**

Today is the third week in Lent. We are almost halfway there. Three more weeks of Lent before Holy Week where we take time to reflect on the crucifixion of Jesus. And then, it’s Easter Sunday where we celebrate resurrection...new life.

As we’re preparing for Lent this year, we’re journeying through Luke’s gospel and looking at how God lifts up the lowly, the marginalized, those on the outside. Throughout the three years of Jesus’ ministry, he was constantly going around and reaching his hand out and pulling people back in...the outcast, the outside, and even the outlaw. In Luke’s gospel in particular, we hear these stories of restoration and renewal.

***We began the series by looking at how God lifts up the lowly.*** The entire Bible is filled with stories of how God lifts up and uses those the world considers less than. God used an elderly, barren woman to help prepare the world for Jesus. God used a poor, young girl to nurture and love the child who would become *The Christ.*

***God restores the marginalized.*** Again, scripture is full of stories of how God has lifted up and restored the marginalized into community. Loving them right where they are at, reminding them that there was a place for them at the table.

Today, we continue to look at how God lifts up the marginalized by looking at some of the stories Jesus told. Let us pray.

**Sermon:** I love a good story. I once read that stories are more important to our survival than food and water. Without stories, we would literally die because stories connect us. They help us to find meaning in life. Our identities are based on the experiences we have lived and the memories we have made and the stories we’ve been told. Cultures are made up of the cumulative knowledge, morals, and beliefs that are cemented in those shared experiences that have been passed down from generation to generation. Stories are life giving.

***In stories, we are also able to find meaning...a good story has power.*** How many of you remember the folktale *The Boy Who Cried Wolf?* What’s it about? It’s about a little boy who loved to cry out “Danger, there’s a wolf” just to get people riled up and see them come running, and they kept warning him. You better stop or someday, we’re not going to believe you. Eventually, a wolf does make his way into the village, but this time, when the little boy cried out, no one believed him and no one came to help.

We know the story. As children, we got it. We knew that kid...maybe we were that kid. We could see that what he was doing was wrong. We understood the outcome. It was a story that we could relate to, and it told us a truth in a way that we could understand. One way or another, it was a story we found ourself in.

Brian McLaren, author and pastor, calls the Bible *“The story we find ourself in.”* I love that image because in it, we can find our story. We can find truth. We can see ourselves in the lives of these people who lived over 2000 years ago, and if we’re willing to, we might even find ourselves saying “Oh...I get it!”

**Jesus was a story teller.** He understood the power of a good story as he told parables. Like folktales, parables were made up stories rooted in events people would understand with the purpose of telling a moral or spiritual truth. If you look through the gospels, you will discover that Jesus told forty-nine different parables, all of which are recorded in the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (John did not include any parables.) Adam Hamilton went through and did all that research for us. He wrote that: nine parables appear in all three Synoptic gospels, two appear only in Mark, eight only in Matthew, and sixteen only in Luke.

Before diving into this parable, I want to talk about how we need to be willing to read them in order to understand what Jesus was trying to tell us. When reading a parable, in order to really understand it to its fullest, we need to be willing to ask a few questions:

**The first question...how do you relate to the people or objects in the story?** We need to be willing to ask ourselves “How do I relate to each and every character or object in this story?”

One of the parables in Luke’s gospel is the Parable of the Lost Coin. A woman has 10 denarii (10 days wage) and she loses one of the coins. It was a substantial loss for her. She searches and searches her house until she finds it. When she finds it, she calls all her friends together and there is a celebration. How do you relate to the woman who lost the coin? How do you relate to the coin? How do you relate to the friends she called together to celebrate? ***First question...how do we relate?***

**The second question is...what does Jesus want us to do with this information?** Is Jesus calling us to be more compassionate to those who have lost something or someone dear to them? Should we be more willing to celebrate when what has been lost is now found? ***What is Jesus calling us to do with this moral or spiritual truth?***

**Let’s dive into today’s parable.** We learn that Jesus is apparently surrounded by a lot of self-righteous folks, because our passage tells us that he’s directing this story at them. “*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.”* It’s a story about a Pharisee, an influential religious leader. He’s at the Temple praying along with a tax collector.

In Jesus’ day, tax collectors were automatically considered sinful people. For one, they were considered traitors of their people, because they went to work for the Roman government and their job was to collect taxes on the Jewish community. Not only that, the vast majority of them were greedy and would pad the taxes they collected for their own financial benefit. They were getting rich off of this.

So, picture it...a tax collector and a pharisee entering the temple to pray. The pharisee is standing there in the middle of the temple where everyone can see him...and hear him, and he prays, *‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.****12****I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’* ***Thank you that I am not a sinful person.***

Then, Jesus tells us that the tax collector didn’t come front and center where he could be seen or heard. He was off to one side. His prayer was much different. His prayer was *‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’*

Jesus told this parable to these religious leaders knowing that they were going to relate to one of them. Which one did they relate to? Which one to do you relate to?

**I would love to say I always relate to that tax collector.** I would love to say that I am always humble and I’m always focused on my sinfulness and my brokenness and where I need to get my act together. Unfortunately, if I’m 100% honest with myself, there are times when I’m the pharisee. Maybe not quite as arrogant as he was, but to the point where I’m thinking at least I’m not as screwed up as that guy over there.

The stories we find ourself in. The stories that Jesus told had a way of helping us look in the mirror and acknowledge that we have work to do.

I remember the moment in my life when I realized that I was the pharisee that Jesus was talking about. It was years ago...decades actually...back in my younger dumber days. I’m hoping that I’m getting smarter as I get older. The situation involved a young women who, at the time, was pretty promiscuous in some of the decisions that she made and she was struggling with the fall out of some of those decisions she had made.

I was involved in a conversation with another person close to this situation. She was at the other end of the spectrum...one serious relationship...married right out of high school. We were talking about this situation with our friend over here and she looked at me and said (I’ll never forget this) “If anyone has the right to judge, it’s me.”

It hit me like a bucket of ice water, and not because she said it, but because in all honesty, I was thinking it. In my head, I was judging that young woman. In my head, I felt that I had the right to judge that young woman. In my head, I felt righteous compared to her. And when it was said out loud, it was like *“Whoa...what did I just do?”* I might not have said it, but I was the pharisee Jesus was talking about. *“Thank you, God...that I am not like her.”*

**First question...how do I relate?** Too often, I’m like the pharisee, but I really want to be more like the tax collector. **Second question...what do I do with this information?** Maybe quit worrying so much about everyone else and spend a little more time on me.

***Since then, I’ve strived to be more like the tax collector.*** *“God have mercy on me...a sinner.”* A someone who doesn’t always choose the right path...a someone who isn’t always kind or compassionate or caring...a someone who is sometimes selfish and self-serving...who isn’t always generous with the things you have given me...*God have mercy on me...a sinner.*

**At the beginning of this series, I shared that Luke is my favorite Gospel because of one word...when.** Both Matthew and Luke have the parable of the Lost Sheep. In Matthew’s gospel, if they find that sheep, there will be a celebration. In Luke’s it’s when. And Jesus didn’t stop with the lost sheep. He went on to talk about that lost coin I mentioned earlier and when that coin was found, that widow woman invited everyone over and they had a great celebration. And then...Jesus talked about the lost son found in Luke 15.

There was a father who had two sons. His youngest son decided that he wanted something different and went to his father, demanded his inheritance (very disrespectful), and went off to a distant land where he partied his inheritance away. Finally, he came to his senses and decided that he needed to go back home.

And as Jesus was telling this story, we discover that the father hadn’t given up on his son. Every day, he stood on the porch watching and waiting, and when he saw his son in the distance, he didn’t wait for his son to get there. The father took off running and met him on the road. The younger brother said wait a minute, *“Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* (Doesn’t that sound a lot like that other parable where the tax collector is asking for forgiveness? *God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*) The father embraced him and called all his friends together. His son, who had been lost was now found.

But not everyone is excited. Not everyone is happy. When his older brother found out that his younger brother was home and that his father had called everyone together for a celebration, he was angry.

Jesus said, *“28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’*

*31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”*

**Who do you relate too?** Or better yet, how do you relate to each of these characters? If it were your son, wouldn’t you be overjoyed that he came to his senses and is now home? If you were the one who was lost, would you be thrilled that your father was there ready and waiting to welcome you back home? Or do you relate to the older son, angry that your no-account younger brother is back?

***These parables remind us that God is a God who is constantly reaching out and welcoming the lost home...a God celebrating the return of the broken.* Are we doing that?** Jesus entire ministry was about reaching out to those tax collectors and prostitutes and everyone the religious folks were looking down their noses at and welcoming them home.

**Where do we find ourselves in these stories? *Is there room in our faith community for those Jesus is trying to bring back into community...to connect to God’s love?*** Where do you find yourself. Where are we as a church? Are we ready to except the tax collectors knowing we are sinners too? Let us pray.