

[Joel 2:23-32](#)

[Psalm 65](#)

[2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18](#)

[Luke 18:9-14](#)

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Tell me a story.

We hear this plea hear from children.

It's why we crack open a new book of the NYT bestseller list.

It's what we ask of movie theaters (or Netflix these days).

Tell me a story: a beautiful, wonderful story.

A story with a message that gives us hope.

A story that teaches.

A story that surprises us, has twists and turns, engages us.

What was your most beloved story growing up?

What is the story you have memorized from repetitive reading to your own children?

What was the first story you read, all by yourself?

I remember reading my first Nancy Drew mystery book
and my mother reading Anne of Green Gables to me.
Then came The Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings

Each of these stories, even re-read now, speak volumes to our desire for
hope, belonging, resolution, instruction in the midst of struggle, and a bit
of escape from reality.

As Christians, we have plenty of stories in our scriptures.
And while they might not be as concise as Dr Seuss or amusing as David
Sedaris, they do offer hope, they give guidance, they remind us that we are
not uniquely new in this journey of questions and searching for meaning.

Today we hear a parable, a story, from Jesus.
This is nothing new in the disciples' time with Jesus.
Jesus is constantly teaching – engaging in dialogue or telling stories.
Stories to give direction, hope, guidance through the struggle of every day
faithful life.

Today's parable follows directly after last week's gospel of the persistent
widow and the unjust judge.

And much like any children's story there appears to be a dichotomy.
Polarity.

Wrong and Right.

The bible is full of these:

A baby born to threaten a seated King (Think: Moses and Jesus)

In Luke we hear of polarity over and over again, outcasts at the table with Jesus, Lepers receiving healing, parables that juxtapose a widow and a judge, one without social standing and power with the powerful.

Banqueting tables that invite all to participate.

Today- a pharisee and a tax collector.

Polar opposites in the vocational field and popularity.

One esteemed in the faithful community and one who was detested.

It is easy to quickly come to the decision that one is better than the other.

Just like the pharisee.

“At least I am not like”.....

Jesus sets this dichotomy up to draw our attention to both the individuals and their understanding of the other.

The Pharisee and his understanding that he has fulfilled his duty.

All that he does reflects this faithful action.

The Tax collector and his understanding that he stands there in need of mercy,
so unworthy to even look up.

I think we can easily look to the two and decide where we fall at this moment. We can judge the other, too. If we are being honest we have been both of these characters at some point. Puffed up with accomplishments or depleted by guilt and shame.

If we rest our souls there, I think we might have missed the point.
The bigger storyline has been lost.

In this parable story we have two individuals who have both come to the faith community.

Both are in need of love and mercy
and both are seeking God-- using language that they feel allows them to be heard.

The first believes that he is worthy by duty and doing.
The second by being.

What is left out is any sense of connection or community of the two people who are in the same physical space.

What is absent and missed is that God loved them first, before they did anything.

God was there and invited them to be in community.

The Pharisee, eyes cast upward, was not going to sit anywhere near the tax collector.

The Tax collector was attempting to fade into the corner, eyes downcast.

A chasm existed between the two.

I wonder where the common ground was for these two socially diverse people and how the story of their identity became so disconnected.

The common ground of this story is that they both faithfully came to pray, to receive, in a space of divine.

The tax collector is celebrated by Jesus because he was open to receiving while the Pharisee was stuck in duty instead of delight AND the devotion of the tax collector.

When we reside in competition or “better than” mode of life we lose the opportunity to receive, to collaborate and see that without each other we are actually less than being the full family of God.

In hearing of someone else's pain or misfortune our response should be from the compassionate heart, not the heady space of comparative lack of fortune.

If we pray that we might be one with gladness and singleness of heart, our hearts should hurt when we hear of the misfortune other members of the family, regardless of how proximate or distant they might be.

In our eucharistic service we hold up the one bread and break it into pieces and give it out evenly to all those who receive the body and blood of Christ.

Shoulder to shoulder we gather around the altar rail or you receive in the pew right where you are.

Your educational status does not matter, the accolades you received are not itemized nor do they prioritize our distribution.

What matters is your open hands to receive, your open heart to be embraced.

There is no "At least" in the Kingdom of God, absolutely no competition. There is instead, absolutely an invitation to each of you to be loved, receive mercy, receive hope, guidance, gladness, and unification despite division.

Each of us is given a chance to reframe the story, to be part of the narrative where repetition and engagement are essential and give life.

I love reading the Bible because there is always a story that fits our situation. Each time I re-read the scripture I hear something new and am given a fresh take on an old familiar and a new way emerges, a way where God is manifested in our midst.

In listening to scripture, we are given space to hear dichotomy and also invitation in the midst our lives, an invitation to find the middle way-- the way of deepest relationship.

A way where God is center to each of our encounters.

The Pharisee looked at the tax collector and did not see him as his brother or companion, he saw him as less than. He saw his status only and not his relationship as a brother in faith.

Where can we take a moment to pause and remember our relationship with one another?

How can we make space to listen to the pain of this world in the midst of duty.

How can we, with holy curiosity, delight in the misadventures and mistakes that we did not plan yet found God there in our midst?

Where can we find gladness of heart even in the darkest moments of our lives without resorting to starting a sentence with “at least”.....

Jesus invites us to reshape the easy story of I am right and you are wrong into “let’s get this right together.”

We have to come together, be in relationship, be with one another and delight with compassion for one another.

Even in the midst of this parable, there is the story of hope and engagement that the Bible holds for us. Jesus continued to teach and live that life for us- full of twists and turns for his disciples and in turn, us.

We receive an open invitation to meet in the middle and join our hearts together to love like the God who created us and delights in us so much that his sacrificial love reaches to us in the midst of our duty or our deprecation.

This is the story of which we are all a part.

Tell me a story, share your own story and realize we are all in this together.
Thanks be to God.