

Don't be Good, Be Faithful—Luke 18: 9-14
(20th Sunday after Pentecost-October 23, 2022)

The reflection today is addressed to Chloe, the child baptized in this morning's service.

Dear Chloe,

Forgive me for such a confusing scripture on the day of your baptism. Your family might be wondering what kind of message this is for a day like today: Jesus admonishes the good person and praises the bad one. One is a pious, devout religious person who prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people — extortioners, murderers, adulterers — or like this tax collector. I fast, I pray, I tithe all I have.” The tax collector, struggling with remorse for his wrongdoings can hardly even pray. He simply beats upon his chest crying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Yet, Jesus says it was the tax collector, the bad guy that went home right in the eyes of God, not the religious person, the good guy. Jesus praises the bad guy as a model of the humility needed for faith. What’s going on here? The message can’t be “all right people, get out there and be humble.” Have you ever tried to be humble? You can’t. When it comes to humility, you either are or you aren’t. The moment you say you’re humble is the instant you no longer are.

Chloe, what can I say except, “get used to it.” This Jesus like to make your head spin. You know Chloe, that’s OK. It’s OK to not know. Not knowing opens you up to others. Your parents will find their greatest meaning and satisfaction in life from nurturing and mentoring you. All because you can’t possibly know all there is to know. Not knowing will open you up to life shaping relationships with teachers, mentors, and friends. You see Chloe, people who claim to know it all have a tough time with relationships. They’re so full of themselves there’s really no room for anyone else. One of the great things about not knowing is the way it creates space for others in your life. If you can live into that way of being, you’ll be well on your way in the life of faith as well.

Let’s go back to our faith story. The tax collector wasn’t acting like he didn’t know what to do with his life or how to pray. He was at a complete loss. How was he going to reconcile faith and what he knew to be good and true with having defrauded his neighbors on behalf of the Roman overlord? He had no idea. His not knowing leads him to humility, to a humble prayer, ‘O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ You don’t know what that’s like yet Chloe, many of us do. The good news if you should ever find yourself in such a spot, the good news Jesus is telling us is that when we admit we don’t know and naturally enter a state of humility we are actually making room for God in our lives. It reminds me of some wisdom I once heard from an African American preacher, “You can’t hide from God, because if you’re running from God’s love, you’re running toward God’s mercy.”

Chloe, a lot of us even after years in the church keep wanting Jesus to say, “I’ve come to gather the good, to reward the righteous. All you high spiritual achievers get in line for your reward.” Time and again Jesus says and shows that a life rooted in love doesn’t work that way. Chloe, you’re going to grow up in a world that tells you the highest values are success (measured in wealth and status), achievement and competence. There’s nothing wrong with these things. Your parents and family want you to live to your full potential, to be happy and secure. If I can just say this though, as a lover of Jesus and a lifelong seeker of truth. It’s something that you’ll hardly ever hear—stay in touch with what you don’t know. Don’t settle for what you know as the complete picture, the whole truth. Genuine humility is impossible if you settle for the comfort of what you know. A faith with integrity will be very difficult, there’ll be no room for mystery, no room for God.

Chloe, it’s not an easy thing to do. There’s not much support for a life of unknowing and humility in a world that worships at the feet of success, competence and expertise. It’s something you’re going to have to approach with intention if you want to avoid the temptations of self-sufficiency and self-importance and live into a genuine humility and faith. I’ve learned a few things from my mentors that help. They’re not so much religious tasks that lead to rewards but rather ways of being in the world that reveal the holiness in everyday living.

First, cultivate a sense of curiosity over judgement. Judging others comes from the false notion that we know everything there is to know, that we’ve got all the evidence. We never do. When you feel yourself getting judgemental get curious instead, “I wonder what brought them to this belief?.” Do this for yourself as well, “I wonder what my reactions say about me?” Curiosity roots you in genuine unknowing, it keeps you humble.

Cultivate a habit of noticing and awe over disregard and indifference. Take time to notice that your heart beats and your lungs expand and contract without any intention on your part. Notice the love people show you in everyday acts of kindness and regard, the people who stick by you despite your failings. Notice and allow yourself to be in awe, in reverence of such things. Noticing and awe will naturally humble you, shifting your perspective on life from something that is to be mastered to a mystery that is to be explored.

Cultivate a sense of gratitude over entitlement. Learn to see yourself not as a self-made person, the end product of all your hard work, but rather as a recipient of gifts. That’s the truth after all. Chloe, this is not to diminish your talents and efforts but rather to allow you to live into the truth that we’re all here by the grace of God, that we’ve arrived on the shoulders of mentors and ancestors, that we’re inheritors of wisdom and knowledge, that the very foundations of life—air, water, soil, this lonely blue planet are gifts. Gratitude will show you how interdependent and interconnected you are. Gratitude will allow you to live in genuine humility as part of something larger than you alone.

Here's the thing Chloe, faith isn't something you master, where you're expected to have all the answers. Faith is a relationship where you open yourself up to the love and grace that surrounds you. I hope our story makes a little more sense now. May God bless you Chloe with a deep hunger for that relationship that you may know the truth of your baptism, that you are God's beloved child. May it be so.

Rev. Joe Gaspar