

“Let’s Be Real: Personal Faith and Social Implications”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 27, 2013
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Luke 18: 9-14 2 Timothy 4: 6-8

Luke 18: 9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

2 Timothy 4: 6-8

6 As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation,
and the time of my departure has come.

7 I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,

I have kept the faith.
8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of
righteousness,
 which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on
that day,
 and not only to me
 but also to all who have longed for
[Christ's] appearing.

Let's be real.

One day a church elder was deep in conversation with five
church pastors.
Another pastor walked up who knew everyone present except
the elder.
“So,” said the sixth pastor to the elder, “*do you preach, too?*”
“No,” said the elder. “*I practice.*”
True story.

Let's be real.

Speaking personally,
 in my initial dialogue with the Holy
 about accepting the call to serve Christ as a
church pastor,

my main objection was that actions
matter more than words.
Practicing rated far higher than preaching.
I told God in no uncertain terms that deeds mean more than
words;
practicing the faith is more important than talking
about it;
how we live out our faith is of more value than
what we say about belief.
I had heard my share of false piety, of clanging gongs and
cymbals.
I was not interested then nor am I now
with being connected to or associated with
false piety, empty platitudes, or self-
justification.
There is a vast difference
between being justified by God and justifying
ourselves.
My gut tells me that neither you nor I
seek to be a part of a body built on false piety,
which could help to explain why we are here,
now, for such a time as this.

Let's be real.

Over the years God has responded and answered each and
every objection.
Clearly I cannot speak for God.
I can only express what I have gleaned from the Spirit of God
through the Holy Bible, your witness,
and spiritual intuition and inspiration.

Indeed, deeds matter.
The holy scriptures teach us that:
"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2: 17)

Practice your faith with your actions, your body and soul,
your hands and feet, resources and decisions,
attitudes and priorities.
Practice your faith regardless of whether anyone is watching.

Words matter, as well.
We can make a world of difference
through the words we teach and say, preach and pray.
Words can embrace, empower, encourage and invigorate.
Words can also tear down, tear up, tear apart, and tear
asunder.
Words can divide the Body of Christ, and they can sing us
into Christian unity.
Our words reveal our inner motives and degree of
faithfulness.
Our words express what is in our hearts and minds.

Let's be real.

Folks have innate radar detectors for falseness.
People pick up on false piety.
We figure out fairly quickly when someone is insincere.

Over the miles and smiles, tears and fears and years
one of the strengths of this significant congregation in
the heart of Decatur
that is admired and emulated
is our authenticity.

Nothing plastic here.
Our mantra could well be Popeye's self-defining
statement: "*I yam what I yam.*"
Our practice of being authentic with God and ourselves and
one another
is pushed and prodded with today's Holy Scriptures.

Let's be real.

In the Gospel According to Luke,

Jesus Christ slips away no less than 8 times to pray and mediate.

His prayer life is integral to his daily walk and talk with God and God's people.

Earlier in Luke, Jesus' disciples ask, "*Lord, teach us to pray.*"

He teaches us how to offer the Lord's Prayer, and he teaches us why.

In today's lesson from the 18th Chapter,

he shows us once again how and why to pray.

At the core, living and practicing a prayerful life is about being real.

Authentic.

Honest.

Humble.

Hearty and heartfelt.

Heard and hearing.

We find Jesus telling his followers a story of two extremes.

Jesus said:

*10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray,
one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus,

'God, I thank you that I am not like other people:

thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven,

*but was beating his breast and saying,
'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*

The Pharisee does not ask anything of God.
He expresses no regrets or admits any errors or claims any responsibility.

He compares himself with others,
and puts them down
in a vain effort to lift himself higher in God's eyes.

He is self-sufficient, self-centered, and self-serving.
We can relate, because we have been there and done that.

In comparison, the Tax Collector
-- also called the Publican in some biblical translations --
asks only for mercy.

Christ affirms the humility and honesty of his prayer.
Only when we are honest, when we are authentic, does personal growth sprout.
Only when we are humble, when we are unassuming, does community foster and grow.
We can relate, because we have been there and done that.

In effect, we have within us both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Which one is commanding your attention and energy?

One evening a Cherokee elder told his grandson
about a battle that goes on inside people.
He said, "*My child, the battle is between two wolves inside us. One is Evil.*
This wolf is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and selfish. *The other is Good.*

This wolf is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.” The grandson thought about it and then asked, *“Which wolf wins the battle?”* The elder replied, *“The one you feed.”*

Which one do you feed?

Which one speaks the loudest through you?

Let's be real.

The Apostle Paul was dealing with the reality of his faith walk and faith community when he wrote his second letter to Timothy.

He said:

6 As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation,

and the time of my departure has come.

7 I have fought the good fight,

I have finished the race,

I have kept the faith.

8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness,

which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day,

and not only to me

but also to all who have longed for [Christ's] appearing.

Paul was being real.

He was not trying to stop the clock.

He was not trying to turn back time.

He was not in denial or being morbid or fatalistic.

He was being real.

Paul lived out a deeply personal faith and trust in God,
yet his faithfulness had vast social implications.

His legacy of faithfulness knew no bounds, thanks to the
grace of God.

Paul knew his time on earth is shortening with each passing
day;

he was looking ahead to the glory of the Lord,
to the unfolding of grace upon grace, of glory
into glory.

Paul was not trying to return to a past that will never come
again.

He was looking ahead, trusting in the Lord to provide.

He was proud of his faithfulness,

despite – and because of – experiences of adversity
and a “thorn” in his side.

We do not know whether the “thorn” he alluded to on
occasion

was proverbial or physical;

it was important enough to bear mentioning
yet not enough to dissuade him from
God’s purpose.

He was real, authentic, grounded in grace and anticipatory of
life after life.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

He said to us, in effect,

that he lived faithfully as best as he could,
and now we are to do the same.

We are to do the same, in word and deed, in prayer and in
practice.

Let’s be real.

Let's be humble and honest, heartfelt and heard.

Let's share our faith with words and deeds,
preaching and practicing our faith with joy and
sincerity.

When we are real, when we are authentic,
we give one another permission to be so as well.

When we seek mercy and share grace, we give one another
room to grow.

This week on National Public Radio's Morning Edition,
the network celebrated the 10th anniversary of
StoryCorps.

*Over the past 10 years, the oral history project [StoryCorps]
has collected about 50,000 interviews
with about 100,000 people in all 50 states.
The project's goal is to give people of all backgrounds
the chance to share and record the stories of their
lives.*

*Dave Isay says he got the idea for StoryCorps
when he was a freelance radio producer.
He had worked on a radio documentary
and then later on a book about the Bowery,
the New York City neighborhood,
and the homeless who lived in
flophouses there.*

*"I remember bringing the galley of the book up into the
flophouse,
and I handed it to one of the guys*

*and he opened it up to his page
and he took the book out of my hand
and he held it over his head
and he ran down the hall
and he started
shouting, 'I exist! I exist!'"*

Isay says. "And that was kind of a clarion call for StoryCorps.

That's what it's all about."

At its core, Dave Isay says,

*StoryCorps is "about giving two people the chance
to have this conversation for 40 minutes,
and it tells them their lives matter
and they won't be forgotten." [i]*

Share your story, and you won't be forgotten.

Share your faith, and you will always be remembered.

Listen to someone else's story, to their dreams and visions,
and they live in you.

Let your faith have some skin on it.

Let's be real, and by the grace of God,

may our faith expression and experience be our living
legacy.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!*

[i] "Air The StoryCorps Theme, Cue The Tears", National Public Radio,
October 21, 2013.