

Message: "True Faith" [see video: "Alyssa's Story"¹]

What an amazing story! Alyssa gives real meaning to "*living by faith and not by sight*" (2 Corinthians 5:7). I don't know what her life is like, being born without sight. But I believe some of us understand what it means to be spiritually blind and then to discover real life.

Alyssa shared a deep insight into the way she lives her life.

Did you hear it? Alyssa has never seen her mother, yet Alyssa believes in and trusts her mother. What she doesn't say is that her mother loves her and she loves her mother. They have a deep relationship. You can see it in the way they interact with each other.

There are people who would look at Alyssa and only see a person without ability. She would be lesser in their eyes. They see her as a burden to her family and others. Yet, after seeing just a bit of Alyssa's story, we know that's not the case. She's a lovely person. She is strong and independent. Her life has value, purpose and meaning. Alyssa's soul is beautiful. I hope you are inspired by her life and faith, as I am. Alyssa inspires us because her faith is real. Her spirit shines into the lives of those she meets. Her attitude toward God is filled with love and gratitude. Alyssa's life and our lives are made better by the love of God.

I believe Alyssa is a model for the parable Jesus tells in our scripture for today, Luke 18:9-14. If you will permit me, I'd like to read it again. The words are on-screen. I'd like to draw your attention to one, key question in the few minutes we have this morning:

"What's your attitude toward God and other people?"

Scripture is like an onion. There are layers of meaning. On the surface there's the way things appear; the nuts and bolts of our lives. As we go a little deeper, we get into the feelings and emotions, the reasons we do what we do and what it means. Finally, when we get to the core, we discover the why – our beliefs. God is working in all of the layers, but when we get to the core, God is more clearly revealed.

This begs the question: what is Jesus revealing in the parable?

It's important to know Jesus was speaking to a specific group of people: those "*who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who*

¹ Source: Worship House Media

looked on everyone else with disgust" (v9). There's another cue in verse 11 when *"the Pharisee stood and prayed about himself."* Other translations offer *"prayed to himself."* You get the idea. Either that person's god was themselves or they were so self-focused they couldn't see God at work in the lives of other people.

What do we call people like that? Self-righteous people. People who behave that way towards others give the faith community a bad name. We all know the type. They're the ones who are quick to judge and who have no problem letting you know how displeased they are with your behavior. Jesus is clear: people who seem themselves as better than others will be humbled (v14).

You may or may not know the parable, but you know the characters in it. Jesus paints two verbal pictures: the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble tax collector. That's how we know them today. Both roles are well-known, but for different reasons.

But have you ever stopped to think about how the people Jesus spoke to would hear the parable? We have to realize who the Pharisees and tax collectors were to begin to understand.

The Pharisees were the business and church leaders of the day. They were members of the synagogue. They served on the building committee, the community outreach group or the nurture team. They attended services regularly, gave 10% of their income, made sacrifices and attended all of the festivals and holy days, even if it meant closing their business during the holidays. They prayed and studied scripture regularly and made sure their children went to Hebrew school. In short, they were the ideal church members of their day. If anyone was going to get Jesus' time and attention, it should be the Pharisees.

Hearing Jesus' view of the Pharisee in his story would be shocking to the people listening! These are godly people. They help others in the community. Why shouldn't they be proud of what they do? Their self-interest is surprising as well. The good shown on the outside doesn't reflect the weakness on the inside.

The second person in the parable is a tax collector. Tax collectors had a bad reputation in the community. After all, they collect taxes from

their own people for their Roman overlords. Tax collectors were known to take advantage and line their own pockets. To make things worse, if you couldn't pay your taxes, the tax collectors had the right to seize your belongings or even force people to sell themselves, or their children, into slavery to pay their debts. Tax collectors were seen as unjust and unwelcome. They weren't part of polite society.

Hearing Jesus' view of the tax collector in his story would also be shocking to those listening. For one thing, they would find it hard to imagine a tax collector in the temple, much less in the presence of a Pharisee. The Pharisee's contemptuous response to the tax collector would seem to be right. The idea a tax collector could have a humble, heartfelt relationship with God is startling. It's a reversal in the way we normally see things. That's the dilemma Jesus gives to all of us.

What do you think about the parable, hearing it from that perspective? The modern day equivalent would replace the Pharisee with a business professional, maybe someone in IT or a local small business owner – someone who goes to the Chamber of Commerce meetings regularly. They have a good reputation in town. They help others who are in need. The tax collector might be exactly that, an IRS agent. Someone who's your neighbor, but who you wouldn't want to have know about your work or lifestyle. They aren't necessarily bad people, but there's always the feeling of government oversight looming over your conversations.

If you ran into both of them at a community prayer breakfast and they acted as Jesus said, who would go home feeling right with the Lord, the business professional or the IRS agent?

Let me shift gears for a second with a story. I spent twelve years living in Massachusetts before I moved to southern California. One of the biggest differences I had to get used to was the way people drive. Esperanza will tell you I used to use a lot of unkind language at times. The folks that got on my nerves the most were the people who would pass at high speed – on the right! You don't get that in New England. The reason it bothered me so much was because I was shocked to find out I had a blindspot. Every time it happened, I was taken by surprise and not in a good way. I felt vulnerable.

We all have blindspots. I'm not talking about driving. I'm talking about blindspots in life. There are aspects of our lives where we can be shocked and taken by surprise. Phobias are a good example. If you're afraid of spiders and you see a spider, you're shocked. We have biases. Some of our biases have the potential to hurt others. We all like to be in control. When we encounter a new or unusual experience, our lack of control can lead to bad behavior, anxiety or unkind expressions.

Which person do you identify with: Pharisee or tax collector?

Many people see themselves as the tax collector. They're like the bad boys and bad girls of faith. We want to see ourselves as the ones with true faith and humility. But maybe we have a blindspot. Maybe we act like the Pharisee more often than we think. After all, do you give up your seat to a visitor? Or complain about the music? Or perhaps you've uttered the seven famous words: we've always (or never) done it that way before. We may do and say the right things, but our faith may be shallow or misdirected. We compare our actions and attitudes to others and, you guessed it, the others always end up falling short.

What does it mean when we think about building our community?

I think the answer is we have to embrace both people. That's what it means to be in a community. Both are God's children. Both have done wrong. Both receive God's grace. Maybe we're a bit of both. There are times when we are self-righteous and judgmental towards others. There are times when we know we've been unjust. The only thing we can do is come to the Lord with our head down, knowing we've done the wrong thing or stood silently watching when injustice was done. We can ask for forgiveness with humility. It take humility to build community.

There's good news: once we realize we are that way, we are free.

We're free because we can change. We can put aside selfish things and come to a sober realization of the nature of our relationship with God. God loves us! We can embrace God's grace. We can see the same struggle in other people, helping us to accept them in all the ways they are different from us. We're united in our relationship with God and one another, not in our lifestyle, status or reputation. Our actions follow our attitude.

Why does it matter? Jesus isn't trying to get us to accept a philosophy. His goal isn't to fill our heads with more knowledge. Our minds and intellect are certainly engaged. There are great depths we can dive into. Jesus wants all of us! He wants our whole being to be engaged in a relationship with God. It's a relationship based on trust, love and faith.

I truly believe we're made better when we believe in Jesus and accept the grace and love of God. We, who are made in the image of God, begin to resemble that image in a more authentic way. Without grace, we're unjust beings. We push, shove and fight to get to the top, so we can have things the way we want. We step on or over people on the way. Living that way is selfish. It's also very human.

Faith alone saves us. There is no other way. We need divine grace. Believing in Jesus comes with amazing benefits. We are forgiven, washed clean of all the stains we carry around on our soul: the wrongs we have done, the times when we should have spoken up or acted yet didn't, the guilt and shame we carry. We are justified before God by faith. Another word for justification is pardon. God's divine grace pardons us. That's the gift Jesus gave us. It's mercy. Forgiveness is the key. It restores us, rights the wrongs we've done and the wrongs done to us. It brings balance to life. We're able to see our lives and the lives of others with better perspective.

There's another side to grace. It's part of our Wesleyan beliefs. Grace not only pardons, it heals. This is the aspect of God's love that lifts us up and builds community. When our perspective changes, we see other people the same way God sees us. We don't look at the material; what will benefit us. We see others as valued children of God, brothers and sisters. No longer do we think in terms of "us" and "them," but "we."

Grace is what gives us the power to trust others, even when we have no reason to do so. It's love in action. That kind of love is powerful. It's what motivates us to acts of justice. It motivates us to speak and advocate for those whose voices are not heard. It motivates us to join and work alongside those who have been oppressed by failed systems and institutions. It motivates us to go into communities locally and across the world to care for those who have been taken advantage of, tending to those in need.

We are at our best when we do so with humility. That’s when God’s blessing is at its strongest and most active. We rely on God, not on ourselves. It takes humility to live in community together as a diverse group of people who come from different origins, environments and histories. But when we do, we’re living the promise Joel gave. We are God’s people, filled with abundant grace, praising God at every opportunity. There is no longer any doubt. We are God’s beloved children. Halleluia!

Joel 2:23-29 (30-32) (CEB)

Children of Zion,

rejoice and be glad in the LORD your God,
because he will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness;
he will pour down abundant rain for you,
the early and the late rain, as before.

The threshing floors will be full of grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil.

I will repay you for the years
that the cutting locust,
the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust
have eaten -

my great army, which I sent against you.

You will eat abundantly and be satisfied,
and you will praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has done wonders for you;
and my people will never again be put to shame.

You will know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I am the LORD your God - no other exists;
never again will my people be put to shame.

After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.

In those days, I will also pour out my
spirit on the male and female slaves.

I will give signs in the heavens and on the earth - blood and fire and
columns of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to
blood before the great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. But
everyone who calls on the LORD's name will be saved; for on Mount
Zion and in Jerusalem there will be security, as the LORD has promised;
and in Jerusalem, the LORD will summon those who survive.

Luke 18:9-14 (CEB)

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else - crooks, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."