

As yourself

Luke 15:1-10

September 15, 2013

Let me tell you about a few of my favorite people.

Kirsten Olverman is one of my favorite people. Lynne and I first met Kirsten and her mother on the Isle of Iona in the summer of 2009. She was then twenty-six, now thirty, a fair-skinned, blond-haired young Scot from Edinburgh. Kirsten is employed as a solicitor -- a lawyer, a public defender -- and has just become engaged to be married to a young man named Christian. I am very, very happy for her!

Kirsten is simply out there -- out there with her thoughts, out there with her feelings, expressive and uninhibited and fun, usually making fun of herself! She is an eager Christian, eager to learn and to grow her faith, and her heart is huge, her heart for Jesus and her heart for people. It is easy, so very easy, to be welcomed into Kirsten's embrace. It is easy, so very easy, to be included among her friends.

My father is one of my favorite people. He was not at all -- not at all! -- like Kirsten in style or in personality, but, like her, he had a most generous spirit. He embodied grace. He was filled with generosity of spirit -- affirming people, encouraging people, helping people, helping people help themselves, helping people love themselves.

He did that in his work as a counselor, but also as a church member, as a friend, and as a father. He had clear values and thoughtful opinions, but was not one to be easily grouped with this side or that side on any issue. He was not part of any faction, but a mediator, a peacemaker, because people of every sort and every opinion and every status felt valued and affirmed by him.

After my father died, there was a terrible and painful falling-out between the pastor and the people in his church in Blue Hill, Maine, and many of them said that if George were still here, this wouldn't have happened. He would have helped the pastor know how to respond to the attacks. He would have helped the people find better ways, more constructive ways, of dealing with their frustrations. He would have helped them work things out.

My father and I hiked Blue Hill, just the two of us, in early August 2001, as it happened, mere weeks before he died. We climbed the mountain and we talked and it was wonderful. I don't ever remember feeling closer to my father, just

because of how accessible he was to me, how affirming he was of me, how much our conversation was honest and free and easy and full of grace.

My father was filled with generosity of spirit. Kirsten Olverman is filled with generosity of spirit. And Chuck Dalton was filled with generosity of spirit. You knew Chuck. You know what I mean.

Chuck was a gentleman. He was a gentle and gracious man, full of encouragement. He made a deliberate effort to make people feel affirmed, valued, appreciated, in quiet and personal and inconspicuous ways. He did that for me, and since he has died, many of you have told me too how he did that for you. Our office manager, Teri, tells me how he would call her every few months just to tell her how good a job she was doing for the church.

Generosity of spirit ...

That phrase has haunted me, if that's the right word, for many years now. It comes from the prayers in the Simple Evening Liturgy we use each Wednesday evening during Lent: "We bring ourselves to God that we might grow in generosity of spirit, clarity of mind, and warmth of affection."

Wow! I love those services and I love this prayer. And how I do pray that it would be true, that I, that you, would grow in generosity of spirit and clarity of mind and warmth of affection. Just think of who we would be, just think of how we would be, just think of what we would mean to our families and our neighbors and our world if we had clear minds and generous spirits, if we were filled with warmth of affection. We would be ... like Jesus!

We would be like Jesus. Generosity of spirit is one of the distinguishing marks of the followers of Jesus. I told you last week we would be talking this fall about the distinguishing marks, the distinctive traits, of the followers of Jesus. The first mark was this: purity of heart. Followers of Jesus want just one thing. They are all in! You can't dally with Jesus. When he invites you to go with him, you go or you don't. You can't follow Jesus sort of. Following Jesus means wanting one thing. It means choosing him before and above everything else.

And the second mark is generosity of spirit. It means embodying the grace of God. It means proving the slogan that heads our bulletin each Sunday: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

But generosity of spirit is about more than being friendly, more than being welcoming and gracious to those who choose to join us here. Generosity of spirit creates space for people to come in. Generosity of spirit draws huge

circles of welcome that end up including all sorts of people that didn't even expect to be invited. Generosity of spirit takes the initiative, crosses the divide, bridges the gap, goes to the far country to find the one who is lost.

That's what the Pharisees lacked: generosity of spirit. They saw all the riffraff, the lowlifes, gathering around Jesus and they grumbled: "This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!"

Who let them in? I'm just as open-minded as the next person, but you can't just let everybody in.

This is a private organization. We have the right to establish our own guidelines for membership.

Can you believe she's hanging out with that crowd? She's going to let herself be pulled down to their level. You would never find me associating with their kind!

There are other churches in this town that are probably a better fit for you.

They grumbled.

Maybe they wanted Jesus to themselves, wanted time and space and freedom for a dignified theological discussion with this teacher of new ideas.

Maybe they didn't want to have anything to do with such undesirables and were peeved that Jesus had put them in this awkward position.

Maybe they were scandalized that Jesus, supposedly a serious student and teacher of the Jewish faith, would want anything to do with them.

Or maybe this provided them a good excuse just to dismiss him and to ignore the teachings that were beginning to make them feel uncomfortable.

They grumbled ... and Jesus told them a story.

They grumbled and Jesus told them a story! He didn't scold them or harangue them or dismiss them. He told them a story. Jesus showed the Pharisees generosity of spirit. He didn't tell them directly that they were wrong (not this time!), but gave them opportunity to recognize the truth for themselves, to say: "Yes! Of course there is joy in heaven when one lost one is found!" Jesus gave the Pharisees the opportunity to acknowledge God's enormous generosity and to want to change their own hearts, to be like God.

But it didn't work. Maybe not all of them, but surely most of them, couldn't see it. They continued to be scandalized by Jesus, by what he said and by what he did and by who he spent time with. Their conflicts with him grew more frequent and their hatred for him grew more intense.

So, what's wrong with them? Now that's a truly dangerous question to ask, isn't it? What's wrong with ... them?

We have already suggested they might have resented the intrusion or feared too close association with the wrong people or couldn't believe that Jesus wasn't more careful about the company he kept. But why? What were they afraid of? What was the threat?

To answer that question, I am going to have to take you to a dark place, a place I am sure you know, but would rather not admit that you know.

What happens in you, what happens in me, when we walk the corridors of a nursing home seeing an old man slumped over in his wheelchair or an old woman lying on her bed in the fetal position?

What happens in you, what happens in me, when we pass the woman in a dirty and ragged dress picking through the trash looking for bottles to add to the pile in her shopping cart?

What happens in you, what happens in me, when we are brought in close contact with someone who is physically disabled, mentally disabled, morbidly obese, desperately poor, terminally ill?

What is the source of our uneasiness, our discomfort, our fear? Isn't it this or something close to this -- that if I acknowledge them, if I bring them fully into my world, I must also acknowledge that I could become like them? (You know, out of sight, out of mind.) And that if I were to become like them, I don't know if I would be able to accept my life or accept myself?

But if I could not love myself then, I am not loving myself now, and I am not loving them. If I could not accept my life then, it means that I do accept my life only as long as -- as long as I am healthy, as long as I am not destitute, as long as I have my mind, as long as I am able to do what I want to do, as long as other people validate me, as long as I am not ... like them.

But that's harsh! If I only love myself as long as I can prove that my life has value, according to some kind of external measuring stick, that's not love.

That's the Pharisees, isn't it? Having always to prove themselves, having to prove their worthiness, to show demonstrable evidence that they -- as opposed to all these others -- are among the good ones, among the ones worthy of God's love. They don't see, and sometimes we don't see, that love is a gift. It's all about grace. It's all about generosity.

They cannot acknowledge frail ones and weak ones and sinful ones, because then they would have to acknowledge their own frailty and their own weakness and their own sinfulness, and in the absence of love, that is unbearable.

"Love your neighbor as you love yourself." That is the second great commandment. As yourself. Which means in the same way as you love yourself, at the same time as you are loving yourself.

Just as loving God and loving neighbor are inseparable -- you can't really love God if you are not also loving your neighbor -- in the same way, loving your neighbor and loving yourself are inseparable. If you don't love yourself, you will be incapable of loving your neighbor, and you learn to love yourself by realizing that, by God's grace, you are already loved unconditionally and completely, as you are and as you will be.

The Pharisees were not generous because they failed to perceive or accept God's generosity. They could not love the outcasts that gathered around the table with Jesus because they did not love themselves. Every hatred is rooted in self-hatred.

May the Lord have mercy on us and help us to see. May we see ourselves in Jesus' story. You know who we are in Jesus' story, don't you? Not the respectable people, not the ones who didn't get lost, not the ones who are invited to join in the celebrating. No, we are the ones who get lost and when we are found, we -- every one of us and every one of them -- are the reason for joy in heaven!

My father had a generous spirit because he understood that, or because he grew to understand that.

When I was growing up, our household had a lot of rules. Many things that most young people experience as a regular part of growing up, I never did, which was mostly for the good. I learned the discipline of making good choices and I was spared some painful life lessons. I was loved and affirmed by both my parents, and yet, consciously or unconsciously, I learned that I had to prove myself, that I had to do well to matter, that I had to do the right thing to be acceptable. I was, and in some ways, still am, a Pharisee.

Whether that came from my parents or from me, I don't know. Probably some of both. But this I do know, that in my father's last decades of life, he grew very comfortable with himself. He had fully experienced and fully accepted the grace of God in his life and that freed him to be full of grace. I watched as the circle of his love grew ever wider and ever deeper, as accepting people, affirming people, loving people -- not just getting it right -- became his first priority. And which is, after all, God's first priority!

Maybe, by the grace of God, by the time I reach the age of seventy-eight, I will have grown to be like my father and like Kirsten and like Chuck, comfortable with myself, fully cognizant of God's grace, and filled with generosity of spirit.

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clarity of mind, and warmth of affection ...*