

If you have ears to hear

Luke 11:37-54

March 17, 2013

A week or so ago, I heard this story on the radio, one of the entries in NPR's Three-Minute Fiction contest. The stories were required to be submitted in the form of a voice mail message.

Hi, sweetie.

I don't really want to say this on a message, but I just can't wait any longer.

You know how we were snuggled up under the blanket in the park last week? Yeah, that was nice. Our six-month anniversary. And we got into a fight about something so stupid as exactly how long we've been dating, and whether it was from when we met at Starbucks or when we went on our first date. Heck, we ended up at that same Starbucks on our first date anyway.

That was our first real fight. Another milestone, huh?

And then you said you thought you were ready to tell me something? Those three little words? Yeah. And you said we could take this relationship to a new level. And I would have to say those three words too.

Well, I think I'm ready to say them.

I can see us going somewhere with this relationship. Maybe we could build a big log cabin someday, together. We could have a farm where we grow something, different, something fun, like, I don't know, hot peppers. We'd go together to farmer's markets to sell them. We'd have ten kids, and build them all kinds of things to play with on the farm. We could watch the sunset each night from the back after putting them to bed, snuggled up under a blanket like we were in the park.

Um, maybe not ten kids. Two or three. Only if you want them. I'm getting a little ahead of myself because I'm nervous. It's just me babbling about my dreams.

But we could do your dreams too. If you want to buy a little place in the city with an art studio and make art all day, that would be cool too. Or, I was thinking, I could quit my job -- in fact, I could quit my whole career,

because you know I've told you so many times that accounting is soooo boring, even when you politely pretended it wasn't on our first date. I could be an artist too. Or a farmer slash artist. Hey, we could build big sculptures on the farm, out of old cars or logs or whatever. I don't know. I want whatever you want. I want you to be happy too. I'd really be happy doing anything, as long as it's with you.

But yeah, you were right that before we move forward in this, I have to say those three words. And you're absolutely right that no relationship between two people can work without getting around to saying them. Someday maybe we'll say them to each other all the time, and give each other a kiss and go to work. I'd like that.

But, still, you know, they aren't easy to say out loud the first time. The thing is, I've never actually said them to anyone else. You're the first. Well, my mom, of course, and my dog Wiggles -- he was my dog when I was seven, a Labrador retriever. I said it to him sometimes, when I was by myself. But you're the first time I've really said it, and meant it.

But I'm ready. I really wish it wasn't on a phone message, but I can't wait any longer.

So, here it goes.

I ... was wrong.

If you have ears to hear ...

One of my favorite Old Testament stories is the story of David and Abigail. This story takes place after David's defeat of the Philistine champion, Goliath, but before David becomes Israel's king. David was in the wilderness with a band of six hundred men living a kind of "Robin Hood" existence: evading Saul's armies, making raids against Israel's enemies, living off the hospitality of the people, and providing them protection in return.

During this time, David sent messengers to Nabal, a wealthy livestock owner, sending him friendly greetings and reporting their just and kind treatment of Nabal's shepherds, and asking for whatever food and provisions he could provide them. Nabal refused. "David? David? Who is he? The country is full of runaway slaves nowadays!" When David heard Nabal's answer, he ordered his men to buckle on their swords, and he and four hundred of his followers set out to take their revenge.

But when Abigail, Nabal's wife, heard of her husband's sorry treatment of David's emissaries, she loaded a generous amount of supplies onto donkeys and went out herself to intercept David and his men. She met David on the way, threw herself on the ground before him, begged his forgiveness, and presented him her gifts. And she said this to David: "When the Lord has done all the good things he has promised you and made you king of Israel, then you will not have to feel regret or remorse for having killed without cause or for having taken your own revenge."

And David answered: "Out of my way, woman! This is man's business. It's mano-a-mano. It's between me and your good-for-nothing husband!"

No, that's not what David answered. David said: "Praise the Lord who sent you today to meet me. You are right. I was wrong."

If you have ears to hear ...

Can you bear to hear the truth?

The truth, the word of God, is like a sword, the Scripture says, like a two-edged sword, cutting through to where soul and spirit, bone and marrow, meet, judging the desires and thoughts of the heart. We don't use swords anymore. Maybe for us a scalpel would be a better metaphor.

The truth, the word of God, is like a scalpel, cutting through layers of skin and muscle and fat to expose our core, to reveal the guts of who we are. The truth is like a scalpel, not a weapon, but a tool in the hands of a surgeon, a tool in the words of a prophet, exposing and excising the tumors, the cancers, the diseased parts of our selves, the unhealthy parts of our spirits.

Isn't this what we mean when we say "the truth hurts?" The truth sometimes does hurt, but the truth heals. If you have ears to hear.

Jesus spoke as a prophet. Jesus spoke the truth. He was invited to eat at the house of a Pharisee, but his host was alarmed when Jesus did not wash his hands before the meal. Now you must understand that the issue was not that Jesus was careless and unsanitary, but that he didn't perform the pre-meal washing rituals prescribed by the rules and traditions of the Pharisees.

Jesus sensed his host's displeasure and launched into a tirade. This is no Jesus meek and mild, but an angry, affronted Jesus, sick and tired of servants of God, the shepherds of God's people, giving so much attention to trivialities and giving little or no attention to the things that really matter.

How terrible for you Pharisees! You clean the outside of your cup and plate, but inside, inside you are full of violence and evil. You give to God one-tenth of your cooking herbs, but you neglect justice and love for God. You love having reserved seats in the synagogues, and you love being greeted with respect in the marketplace, but you are really like unmarked graves that people trample without even knowing it.

And how terrible for you teachers of the Law! You put onto people's backs loads which are hard to carry, but you won't lift a finger to help. You make fine tombs for the prophets, colluding with your ancestors who murdered them. You hold the key that opens the door to the house of wisdom, but you won't use it, and you even prevent other people from entering in.

If you have ears to hear ...

Did the Pharisees and teachers of the Law have ears to hear? Do you?

How terrible for you, you who call yourselves Christians! You prettify your sanctuaries while people walk by your churches hungry and homeless. You keep up with your pledges, you make an offering to One Great Hour of Sharing, but you do nothing to change the world, nothing to achieve justice. You sing hymns and recite the Lord's Prayer, but you neglect love, love for God. You care more about your reputation. You care more about what other people think of you. You crave the praises of your peers.

And how terrible for you, preacher! You proclaim the message of Jesus, calling people into a life of selfless service, but what do you do to help? Do your actions match your words? You speak in praise of the prophets, but do you heed their words?

(I serve on the board of the Martin Luther King Peace Walk committee, and I have realized how much easier it is to build monuments to dead prophets than to listen the hard truths they speak!)

How terrible for you, preacher! You have been given the keys to the kingdom, the message of the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, but do you live it? Do you follow him? You go where you want to go. You do what you want to do, and you make it all too easy for everybody else to do the same.

If you have ears to hear ...

When Jesus finished his rant, what did the Pharisees and teachers of the Law do? They criticized him bitterly and they plotted against him. They did not hear him. They could not bear the truth. They could not say "I was wrong." They had too much at stake, which is to say, they had too much pride at stake.

That's what we need to give up for Lent ... pride! Pride that gets in the way of hearing the truth. Pride that gets in the way of change that brings life. Pride that gets in the way of the healing we need and the healing our world needs.

Be glad for the woman, be glad for the man, who can hear the truth and say, "I was wrong." And be very glad if that woman, if that man, is you!