

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

As I'm sure you all know by now, I'm the Chaplain at WES, which is a Pre-K3 through Grade 8 school. And this year, to get to know some of the students better, I participated in the Middle School Book Club led by the librarian and a Middle School English teacher. Each month, the Book Club would choose a genre, and we'd all read different books in that genre, and then we'd share about the books we read. It was a sweet crew—mostly 6th grade girls who were interested in reading “dark romance” as they called it—and it was fun to hear about all the different stories.

Anyways, because of this book club, I read at least five or six Young Adult novels this year. As the year went on, I noticed that several of the plots were similar: many of the stories revolved around the main character hiding or lying about their life or identity in order to win someone over or to smooth out a tricky situation. In one book I read, a teen lied to her mom about getting an important leadership role at her Catholic school in order to hide the fact that she was gay; in another, a girl pretended she was into all the same things as her best friend, to avoid the truth that they were growing apart; and in yet another, a boy tried to hide his grief and trauma from his new friends in order to seem “normal.” The result was always the same: invariably, there would be a comedy of errors, and chaos would ensue. Though these adolescents thought that hiding their problems or

imperfections would fix their relationships and lives, what happened was exactly the opposite.

As enlightened readers, it may be easy for us to roll our eyes at the decisions of these characters. We may ask, “Why didn’t they just tell the truth right from the beginning? All that trouble and drama could have been avoided.” But I think so many of these stories have similar setups and are so popular precisely because they’re so relatable to real life—and not just the lives of teens. Who among us hasn’t hidden something from others, in hopes it would make us seem more desirable as a friend, partner, or colleague? Who hasn’t covered up a mistake or an area of growth out of shame or from fear of rejection?

I certainly relate to these impulses. When I look back over the past few years of therapy and spiritual direction in my own life, this theme has been a consistent topic of discussion. I’ve had to unpack my own modes of hiding or covering things up so that people perceive me as “good.” I’ve started to understand that my defensiveness around admitting I’ve made mistakes or hurt someone is because I’m so scared it’ll mean I’ll be abandoned or cast aside. Over the past several years I’ve been learning what the teen protagonists in these books demonstrate over and over again: that the urge to hide or cover up our imperfections or mistakes is itself what leads to isolation and loneliness.

This is why when I hear our gospel passage today, I experience some

compassion and resonance with the self-righteous religious leaders. Today's text from Mathew introduces us to the Pharisees, who observe Jesus' behavior and associations and respond with suspicion. The Pharisees see who Jesus is spending time with, and ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Their skepticism only grows from there. Only a few paragraphs later, they accuse Jesus of being a, "Ruler of the demons;" and a few chapters after that, they condemn him for plucking grain on the sabbath and for healing on the sabbath. Not long after, Matthew writes, "The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, [on] how to destroy him."

We may be shocked at this escalation, but what I see here is a group of religious leaders so scared of admitting the possibility of their own flaws and their own need for mercy and compassion that they'd rather destroy Jesus than place themselves among a group that includes tax collectors and sinners. It appears these religious leaders have built their whole identities around being more righteous and more holy than others, and when this wise and generous and holy teacher refuses to affirm their superiority, it leads to suspicion, outrage, and, ultimately, violence. This fear of being seen as one really is—imperfect and in process—can lead people to go to extreme measures.

This is why it feels like such a balm for me to read Jesus' words in response to the Pharisees. He says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but

those who are sick...I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” **In responding to their intense anxiety about goodness and correctness, Jesus reveals some amazing news: Jesus meets people most fully in their brokenness and imperfections.** In fact, this is the entire reason why God has become incarnate in Jesus: to be fully present with and to transform those who acknowledge their inability to do things on their own.

The Pharisees may not understand this in today’s text, but look at the rest of the passage! The outcasts and the needy are flocking to Jesus. First, there’s Matthew, the tax collector. As a Jew collaborating with the Roman Empire and extracting resources from his own people, Matthew’s status as an outsider and reject would have been clear. And yet, while Matthew is sitting at the very tax booth that ensures his social exclusion, Jesus comes up to him and invites him to follow him. Matthew—with no lofty notions about his own goodness—follows Jesus immediately. We see a similar thing as Jesus travels to visit the daughter of the synagogue leader. A woman, desperate for help after twelve years of bleeding, timidly approaches Jesus, only bold enough to touch his cloak. And yet, at her touch, Jesus turns and truly sees her—in all her suffering and pain—before praising her and healing her. Jesus—and thus God—meets people most fully when they are honest about their brokenness and their needs.

Friends, the good news found in this passage is true for us too. Jesus doesn’t

just show up for us when we're at church and in our Sunday Best. No, Jesus meets us in the Eucharist, and through his Spirit, and through other people, and out in Creation precisely because he knows we need him; precisely because he knows we are broken and imperfect and in need of healing and transformation. This is the Jesus of the cross, who remains present with us and interceding for us even at our lowest moments, reminding us that we are beloved and that we are more than our mistakes and our vulnerabilities.

I don't know what you all think, but to me, this is very, very good news. So, how should we respond to it? Firstly, it's an invitation for all of us to let go of any illusion of perfection or of having it all together. We can put down this burdensome idea that we have to be flawless in order to be loved and we can understand instead that Jesus is with us and transforming us when we admit our need for help. If we really believed we could make mistakes and admit our wrongs without losing our worth or our belovedness, how might our relationships and communities and systems change? How might we live more boldly and more honestly?

Secondly, it's a call for us to make our churches & our cities places where we affirm this truth too, that Jesus is most present with us in our brokenness and our need. How are we mirroring God's grace to those who show up with situations that aren't tidy or convenient? How are we making space & time for healing to take place, in an imperfect & nonlinear manner, trusting Jesus is at work?

Only a few chapters after today's passage in Matthew, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Let us cast off the burdens of perfection and of hiding our mistakes, and let us lay bare our brokenness and need: because this is where Jesus is most fully with us and where our healing begins.