

In a recent interview, Daniel Jones, an editor for the *New York Times* said, “The true thing is that you have to be vulnerable to find love and keep it going. We’ll do anything to avoid being vulnerable. But it’s the core thing we have to be.” He should know. He’s been the editor of the *New York Times* weekly column *Modern Love* for 15 years. During those 15 years he’s read thousands of people’s stories of love in our modern times. Far from being the equivalent of fairy tales, these stories are about real people and their very real lives.

If you are unfamiliar with this long running column you are not alone. I did not know about it until I saw a new television series based on the column earlier this month. Not all the stories are about romantic falling in love and getting married stories. Some are about friendship, parenthood, marriage, lost love, and grief – all of which are expressions of the little four-letter word love. In every story, no matter the expression of love, it all boils down to moments when the people in relationship are courageous enough to be vulnerable with each other. When they strip off all the things they could use to avoid vulnerability and say what needs to be said and are courageous enough to refuse defensiveness and are vulnerable enough to hear what needed to be heard.

In one story, that looked like a married couple who were in therapy to explore if they still had enough in common to want to stay married after their children grew up. It is a story of painful moments, put downs, insults, and fights until the wife realized therapy wasn’t working. What she realized was she didn’t need a therapist to tell her what she already knew, she just needed the courage to tell her husband she was jealous of his career and the way he kept her from being welcome in the world he went to work in. Once she said what she needed to say, and her husband was able to hear those words, they could begin working on their relationship. Another story was about a couple who decided to adopt a baby, and it too is a story of painfully awkward moments, veiled insults, and tension until one man admitted that while his husband couldn’t wait to be a parent, he was terrified of the sacrifices he knew he’d have to make in order to parent a child. Once he was brave enough and vulnerable enough to admit his fears, it was amazing how he was able to live into those fears and embrace all the joys and pain that is the love we call parenthood.

Daniel Jones observation seems spot on. The circumstances of love don't seem to matter; if one is going to find love and for that love to grow, we have to be strong enough to be vulnerable with each other. That doesn't just apply with our love for each other, it also applies to our love for God, which could be the truth Jesus' parable in our Gospel this morning is pointing to.

Scholars tell us the parable of two men at prayer is only found in Luke's Gospel. It is one of the few parables the author of Luke thought fit to preface with their own explanation. The reason for that explanation might be because of the culture of the time Jesus told the parable, a culture that probably was still going strong years later when the author of Luke's Gospel wrote it down. No matter the time we hear this parable, it is tempting to assign the role of good guy and bad guy to the characters in the parable. Even before we know the ending, we humans are pretty bad at preventing our cultural and personal biases from interfering with our interpretation of which characters are good and which are not. We like those stories that start with the good guy wearing one color and the bad guy wearing another color so we can keep them separate.

The trouble is, in Jesus' time the good guy would have been quickly and easily without any controversy been identified as the Pharisee. Because this Pharisee was part of one of the more if not the most liberal branches of Judaism. Scholars also tell us that this Pharisee, by evidence of his prayer, is one of those guys who goes above and beyond what is expected of him in his practices of piety and in his expressions of generosity. He could be called the Oprah of his time. He was heroic. His prayer, other scholars assure us, fits the proper form; there is no intention for him to come across as arrogant. He is even giving God praise for all he has and is able to do.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees were the religious superheroes of the time. They were doing what most people just couldn't do, and they were admired for it.

Tax Collectors on the other hand, were synonymous for traitorous villains. They were people who had turned their backs on their families and communities in order to work for the oppressive Roman government and make their money at the expense of their own people. They were hated. They willingly contributed to and profited financially from the oppression and suffering of their own people. They were despised. They were and always would be the bad guys.

Those who first heard Jesus' parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector would have been shocked or maybe even angered or offended to hear that the one who went home justified was the one they would have identified as the bad guy. And the problem with that is it's then too easy to miss the point that this is not a parable about good guys and bad guys. It is a parable about loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

When we wonder what made the tax collector's prayer the one that was justified, it is hard to do so without getting stuck in the very trap of comparisons the author of Luke warned against in the parable's preface. Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work and author of many bestselling books and popular TED Talks, has discovered in her own research that the practice of comparison is actually a function of fear and scarcity. It's that age-old fear of not enough attention, love, or wealth to go around; it is also the fear of a person not being enough or good enough to deserve what they have or want. Comparison is not an expression of God's Love in the world and is not a way to respect the dignity of every human being. Yet it is so easy to do. It is also a way to put up a barrier between people and between people and God. One commentator noted that in this parable the Pharisee was actually using religion itself to protect him from God. It was putting himself in the place of God as judge of the worth and value of both himself and a fellow human being.

Whereas the tax collector seems to be avoiding the temptation to put himself in God's place. Will he make the changes we might want to see someone who takes advantage of his own people make? No one knows. We have to remember he isn't real, just a character in a parable. We won't ever know what happens next. But maybe we don't need to. Maybe it is enough to recognize the tax collector was able to find the courage to peel away his layers of defensiveness, how others see him, and simply admit his sin to God. At the end of the parable Jesus stated that was the prayer that expressed a love for God, maybe because that was the one that was brave and vulnerable.

Perhaps this is also a parable of how God wants to be in relationship with us. We don't have to pretend to be something or someone we aren't with God. God's love is vast enough and all-encompassing enough to include everyone. We don't have to worry about vying for places of favoritism with God. God already loves us. Which means God just wants us to love God back, as best we can. What we can learn from those love stories on the *New York Times* column *Modern Love* is that those moments of vulnerability are what strengthen relationships. It is not weak to be vulnerable, that is true strength, because that is the stuff that makes relationships stronger. Not just our relationships with each other, but our relationship with God.

In our prayers, maybe we can try to be a bit more vulnerable with God than we have before. When we pray, if we are usually asking for God to grant our wishes or tell God what we want, instead maybe we can just tell God how we really feel, or what we really fear, or what we hope. Maybe we can practice trying to strip off the ways we try to keep God at a safe distance and be vulnerable enough to invite God to come closer into our lives. Maybe we can practice being vulnerable by quieting ourselves in order to listen to God. There are lots of formal ways of doing this: meditation,

contemplation, praying with color, walking prayer. But sometimes all we need to do is turn off the world around us for bit and just listen to something beyond our thoughts and fears. This kind of prayer is not necessarily easy, nor does it always come naturally, so it might take some practicing, enduring some rough patches, just like anything else. But not only is it possible, it may be the core truth of loving a God who made Gods-self vulnerable through Jesus--- and loving each other ----- in our modern times ----- and any time.