

# Learning to be generous

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Have you ever met a truly generous person? By generosity, I do not mean giving money or wealth, but I mean giving time, attention, love, help, understanding, forgiveness or even a smile. Maybe it was one of your friends, one of your teachers, your parents, your grandparents or your partner who has shared with you their generous heart. Or maybe it was someone you didn't know very well – a stranger who listened to your sorrows and gave you encouragement along the way.

Three years ago, I attended the Children and Youth Institute at Naramata Centre. During that time, I met a minister from Calgary who led the whole worship. His words and actions touched my heart so much that I was inspired to find my own way in Canada. Even though he was busy, he set aside some time for us to talk during the event. It was his attentive listening and his caring heart that made me feel understood and welcomed. He was so present to me that I opened my heart to share my struggles and concerns with him. And I felt healed by his generous listening. He showed me how to be generous to others – even those I've just met.

Sometimes it is easier for us to be generous to someone we don't know well than to be generous to someone we know. When you are generous to a stranger, you expect nothing back from them, but you always expect generosity to be returned by friends and family. It is hard to be generous to those who, you think, did something wrong, those who hurt you, those who are disrespectful to you, or those who show strong differences of opinion. It is a challenge for us to be generous in those cases.

It was probably a challenge for the Pharisee to be generous to the tax collector in today's story. Tax collectors were considered traitors by fellow Jews, because they were working for the hated Romans. Moreover they were well known for their greed because after having met their financial responsibility, they were free to keep any surplus for themselves. Everybody thought that the tax collectors were sinners, and they were

despised by many people; most of all by the righteous, upstanding Pharisees.

Two people went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. They prayed in the same place, but only one of them prayed with true penitence. The Pharisee was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." Whether we pray like this or not, we know what that means: God is on my side because I am the model of all that is correct.

We all have learned throughout history how dangerous it is to be self-righteous; when people believe in their own spiritual purity, they have felt free to hate each other, hurt each other and even kill each other. Self-righteousness not only hinders us from seeing the best in other people, it also hinders our spiritual growth.

If the Pharisee had opened his mind and his heart, he could have talked to the tax collector, person to person. If so, he could have known the tax collector differently, as a man who needed God's mercy. And if the Pharisee was humble before God, he might have experienced the God of forgiveness and grace for all. Perhaps even a brief encounter could help the Pharisee to understand the tax collector better.

Let me share with you an encounter that changed my understanding. I don't have many memories about my father, because I grew up without him. He left home after my mother gave birth to my older brother, five years before I was born. My father wanted to be a successful businessman, and he put his career above his wife and children. He started each new business with great hope and expectation, but they all failed, time after time. My mother was different; she took responsibility for her three children, and raised us without any help. Her life was difficult, but she gave us the best home she could. My father sometimes came back home to stay just for a couple of days or for a couple of months, but there was no real relationship between my father and myself.

Whenever I saw my mother weeping, I was angry with my father. She was hurt and so was I. It took me courage and patience to forgive him. When I was getting married, I made a phone call to my father. I wanted to meet

with him, to tell him that I was getting married, to ask for his blessing and offer my forgiveness.

But I was shocked by his totally different understanding. He felt no need to be forgiven – in his eyes, his family had let him down, and we were the ones in need of his forgiveness. My father's point of view was so shocking to me that I had to try to see him not from my own point of view, but from God's. And I found him not as an irresponsible or careless father, but as a pitiful person who needed God's mercy. I still feel hurt, but I have learned to see him differently.

I am not my father's judge, and I know that I need God's mercy as much as my father does. If I had only one prayer that could reach God's ears, it would not be the Pharisee's self-elevating prayer; it would be the tax collector's "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

I think we can learn much from that prayer. The tax collector would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" This prayer comes out of his self-reflection, honesty, humbleness and a deep trust in God's mercy.

We don't know whether the tax collector was generous or not, we don't know whether he was changed or not. But we can imagine that the two people would have treated others in much the same way they said their prayers: whether they experienced the God who has partiality or the God who forgives and is gracious to all.

And Jesus confirms that our God is the God of forgiveness. So he taught us to pray to God "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." We forgive, we are forgiven in turn. May we always remember that a generous spirit bears witness to our most generous, forgiving God.