

I. Advanced Organizer

A. Opening Story

1. I'm pretty sure this picture was taken about **29 years ago**, on my first day of 6th grade. Beginning of middle school.
2. Blanked out much of middle school. I have a handful of strong memories.
 - a) The big positive ones: I wrote new lyrics to the 1987 tune "Wild, Wild West" by the Escape Club that got chosen to be our teams theme song in the 6th grade Olympics. I sang my first solo, "memory" from Cats, in the school talent show and got a lot of praise.
3. But there are harder memories too:
 - a) I remember the boys in my 6th grade advisory class who teased me, threatened me, and sometimes tore up my homework.
 - b) And then there were the kids who focused on one of the physical features I became most self-conscious of- my teeth. I hadn't had braces yet. and in my family, there's often a naturally occurring overbite that happens. You can see it here. And the kids saw it too. They called me Beaver. I have this memory of trying to unlock my locker, and as luck would have it, I was write above this boy who thought that name was hilarious. Every day he'd see me as we went to our lockers. Every day he'd call me Beaver. I'd try to act like it didn't matter. But I remember the tears just below the surface as I tried to ignore him and just open the darn locker and put away my books. Nearly 30 years later his smug taunt still stings.
 - c) I've been thinking about this for the first time really in 30 years because now I'm the mom of a 6th grader. And as a parent, I'm sad but not surprised to see that in many ways, 6th grade isn't any different than it was 30 years ago. The context may be different; the insults may be different, but the experience is largely the same.
 - d) Middle school is tough, Kids can be rude and mean. Perhaps the beginning phase of something all humans are tempted to: seeing others as less and bolstering your own sense of identity by demeaning someone else's

B. New series: "A Generous Faithfulness"

1. We've been on a journey this fall confronting our idols. Wrestling with what we need to confront and move away from. But in this series, I'm interested in exploring as we leave the idols behind, what are we moving into? And as I prayed about it, the term "Generous Faithfulness" is the term that just kept selling in my Spirit.
2. faithful rootedness in Jesus that is expansive, rather than exclusive
3. rootedness in Jesus that helps us see possibility for hope and new life in the face of cynicism and discouragement
4. A way of following Jesus that isn't a straight and narrow path but a wide expanse of grace.
5. Brené Brown is an academic, researcher, author and speaker who does much of her work in the areas of shame and vulnerability, as well as looking at leadership and wholeheartedness.
 - a) Her new book, *Braving the Wilderness* - how do we experience real connection with others and a sense of belonging, while also staying true to our own stories and the ideals they shape us, even when those put us at odds with others.
 - b) Brené defines the paradox of belonging this way:
 - (1) **True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to *change* who you are; it requires you to *be* who you are.**

- (2) feels very much like the call for all of us individuals and community. How do we create space to follow Jesus, where we are resisting the idols that so pervasively plague the cultures we find ourselves in, and yet do that in a way that opens up connection rather than closing ourselves off from it?
- c) Brene is a grounded theory researcher, meaning she develops theories based on people's lived experiences rather than proving or disproving existing theories. And in the research covered in this book, she's tackling the quest for this true belonging she described. She was asking the questions: **When it comes to belonging - What are people trying to achieve? What are they worried about?** Through thousands of interviews, she'd assess responses, draw patterns from people's experiences. She boiled down her findings to four recommendations for true belonging, each of which is a chapter in her book.
- C. I'm interested as we begin our new series particularly in the first of these: ***People are hard to hate close up. Move in.***
1. In this chapter, Dr. Brown is noting what we're all aware of - our public discourse has gotten more and more contentious. We see this in all kinds of places. Social media particularly is a hotbed of meanness.
 - a) **Trolling is on the rise**, which is making a real impact on how people use the internet. A Pew Research Center survey published two years ago found that 70% of 18-to-24-year-olds who use the Internet had experienced harassment, and 26% of women that age said they'd been stalked online. A 2014 study published in the psychology journal *Personality and Individual Differences* found that the approximately 5% of Internet users who self-identified as trolls scored extremely high in the dark tetrad of personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and, especially, sadism. These statistics are a few years old. I'd reason to guess after the vindication of those who saw themselves trolling their candidate into the White House, the problem is even worse. Due to the onslaught of negativity, many folks, feeling harassed are withdrawing from social media altogether.
 2. At the heart of this negativity Brown says is the **tendency of human beings to practice dehumanization of one another.**
 3. *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*, David Livingstone Smith
 - a) disturbing title that highlights how dark this behavior goes. It might begin in the school yard of middle school, but it goes much farther than there. Propaganda is often an important tool in these campaigns. There were images that circulated in Germany during World War II, representing Jewish people as rats. In Rwanda, a Hutu Politician referred to the Tutsis as cockroaches. Closer to home, propaganda has often depicted African Americans as Apes. I also found an American poster recruiting soldiers in WWI that depicted a German soldier as a gigantic ape like King Kong, clutching a white woman dressed as Lady Liberty with her breasts exposed. The caption was "Destroy this mad brute. Enlist."
 - b) dehumanization a response to conflicting motives. We want to harm others, but as social creatures our wiring doesn't permit us to actually harm our own, and so we have to make people something else. "Dehumanization is a way of subverting those inhibitions."
 4. **Michelle Maise** is the head of the philosophy department at Emmanuel College. She explains that most of us believe that people's basic human rights should not be violated - crimes like murder, rape, torture are wrong. **But dehumanizing works because it creates "moral exclusion" of a group.** (more here- p.73)
 5. Resonant with conversation we've had in the past around Rene Girard and Scapegoating.

II. **Dehumanization isn't a new game.** It was a problem in Jesus time, too.

- A. When Jesus comes on the scene...there's a number of various classes and groups, those who are seen as upstanding members of the Jewish community he's a part of, and those who aren't.
- B. Jesus would call this behavior out when he saw it. And I think in calling it out, Jesus wasn't just trying to chastise those who dehumanized others. Jesus is doing something more. One of Jesus favorite ways to teach was through storytelling. One of my favorite NT professors and a scholar who specialized in parables called them, "Stories with intent." Something we're gonna examine a bit closer through one of the stories he told that I think gets at the heart of this question of dehumanization and probe what might Jesus' intent have been in telling it. Luke 18:9-14
- C. ***'9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'***
- D. Jesus introduces us to a setting that would have been known to his audience and two characters in it.
 - 1. **The setting:** The temple Jerusalem. While Luke doesn't give us the location this story was preached in, there's good reason to think Jesus told it in the Jerusalem area where it would have packed the most punch. The temple in Jerusalem is on the top of a hill. A regular part of Jewish spiritual practice then was to climb the hill every day up to the temple to pray. Further, there were two times a day, once in the morning and once in the evening, when the community gathers for public prayer and sacrifices for atonement. Again, while its not explicit, clues in the story allude to this being the case. **The story we are seeing take place is one that could take place any day in Jerusalem as twice a day, groups of Jews come to encounter God and receive mercy for their sins as they gather for prayer and sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple.**
 - 2. In this well known setting to the audience, Jesus places **two well known characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector.** Each of them is a part of this corporate experience of public worship, but each is standing apart from the crowd for various reasons. Who are each of these characters? What do they represent?
 - 3. **Pharisee is closer to people he's addressing.** Now in some ways, if we've grown up in the church, or attended even for awhile, this story can be ruined for us. We've become used to reading stories that are critical of the Pharisees. It's easy for us to see them as cartoonish, judgmental, self-righteous people, but to hear the story that way distorts what Jesus is doing because it distorts the surprise. For Jesus' audience, hearing this decades before the gospel writers would right their hindsight is 20/20 account we all know as the gospel, this Pharisee - he's one of the good guys. He's who'd they imagine to be their peer, their moral equivalent, if not the one they are aiming to be.
 - a) In his prayer, **the Pharisee makes a couple of direct claims about himself;** claims the story does not refute. We can assume them to be true.
 - (1) He says he **fasts twice a week.** This would have been an impressive feat. Custom for faithful Jews in that period was to do a weekly fast, that was the expected sign of

- devotion. But to do it twice a week that's really going above and beyond in terms of observance. That's another level of faithfulness.
- (2) He also says he gives **a tenth of all his income**. This too is above and beyond the expected observance of the day. In Deuteronomy, the law required Jews to give a tenth of the produce of their fields, but this man says he gives a tenth of all his income, likely including herbs from his herb garden, which were not required.
 - (3) So Jesus is painting this **complicated picture of someone who does seem to have it all together** when it comes to living a faithful life. If anyone should feel good about their status before God based on how they live their life, most people hearing Jesus would assume this guy should. **But that's not all that Jesus tells us about the Pharisee.**
 - (4) Jesus uses his storytelling to take us past the outside performance of faith and into the heart and mind of the Pharisee. **We see his narcissism- his obsessive self concern.** His whole prayer is not a request for God's help in any way. It's not really even a prayer of gratitude. Instead, it's a celebration of all he believes he's achieved. Just see the four "I" pronouns in a row.
 - (5) **In tandem with the Pharisee's narcissism is how he feels about others.** We hear in his prayer, not just a celebration of his own holiness, but also a sense of smug security that he is not one of the other people there. He is standing apart from the crowd, and in his prayer we see why. He sees himself as morally superior. He is morally fit. And the others he observes, he understands them to be less so. Thieves, rogues, adulterers, and this very tax collector he sees - they're the class outside of moral inclusion. They are the ones on the other side of the line. **For the Pharisee, they are less than fully human.**
 - (6) *Luke gives us a clue* to interpreting this parable that we don't always get, right at the start of the passage. 'He... told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.'
 - (a) Psychologists commonly define contempt to be a mixture of anger and disgust. This is what Jesus saw in the heart of the audience and he wanted to call it out.
 - (b) **But I don't think calling out contempt and dehumanization was his only aim here.** If it was, he could stop the story there and say ("He thought this and he was wrong.") But the story's not over.
4. The story goes on to shift our attention from what's happening with the Pharisee to what's happening with the tax collector.
- a) Again, he may be a familiar character if we're used to the gospels. But remember how his audience would have heard it. **They had good reason to be angry at the behavior of tax collectors.** Tax collectors were the ones profiting off of their oppression. Tax collectors are in bed with the empire that oppresses them. They enrich themselves at the expense of others. And nothing about the story indicates that this particular tax collector is different; that that is not part of his life.
 - b) **But the story does show us more to him than that.** Luke gives us a description of how he prays. While the Pharisee simply stood and felt good about himself with lots of words of self-praise, the description of the tax-collector's actions in the story take up more space than his words. We see that he, too, stands apart from the crowd, not because he is too good for them, but because he fears he is unworthy to be present. He can't even lift his eyes to heaven the story says.

- c) **The picture is also that he is beating his breast.** You got to admit, that's a strong image, hard to imagine happening in church today. But this isn't just a cultural thing. Beating one's breast is a gesture used by Mideastern men seldom and only to express the most extreme anguish. We find examples only here and at the cross. **This man is in anguish. And the few words he prays demonstrate where that anguish is centered.**
- (1) **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"**
- (2) This man understands something that the Pharisee and likely much of Jesus' audience has forgotten - **that to be human is to struggle with sin.** To be created in the image of God, wired for the kind of communion, loving mutual relations that God expresses within God's own self. To be human is to long to live alongside God in the garden, walking in the cool of the day, and yet be tempted by the whisper of the serpent to eat from the knowledge of good and evil, and take upon oneself the capacity to determine which is which. To be human is to hungry for deep connection, and yet be in need of mercy. Again and again Jesus confronts the tendency he sees in his community to **allow the appearance of to be the grounds for moral exclusion**, rather than a testament to shared humanity and an invitation to connection and grace.
- (a) When another group of religious elites brought Jesus a woman caught in adultery so as to stone her, Jesus invited them to remember that she was no more sinful than they.
- d) **In the telling of this story Jesus is doing more than calling out the dehumanizer. He is rehumanizing the Tax collector.** He is reminding us that this person is more than his job, however corrupt it may be. His humanity cannot be dismissed. He has more human heart and desperation for God than perhaps anyone else at the temple gathered that day.
- (1) Brian Stevenson quote "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

E. What we see Jesus doing here, rehumanizing the tax collector is what Brene Brown believes is needed for communities to embody in this era of rampant dehumanization. We must commit to the rehumanization of those who have been dehumanized.

1. Many of the idols we confronted in the last series all operate through some sort of dehumanization. Women are outside of the line moral inclusion in some way. Or queer folk. Or people of color. Or God-forbid the theologically liberal. But Jesus didn't just tell stories that dehumanized folks, he lived a life that said "no". You don't get to do that! And in the ultimate demonstration of the futility of moral exclusivism he took on the role of the dehumanized himself. He became the one who was excluded. He wore the crown of thorns. He endured the mocking. And when they felt justified in killing the less than human one among them, he defied their satisfaction. He rose from the dead, embodying both solidarity with those who have been dehumanized as well as victory over the dehumanization. He reminded those who have been morally excluded that they are included with a new creation that he is just the beginning of. One where the first will be last and the last will be first.

III. **If we are to be a community of resurrection, a part of the New Creation that Jesus was just the beginning, than we must be a community of rehumanization.**

- A. Become aware of when and how we're tempted to move from anger to contempt and in contempt engage in dehumanization. This happens on social media everyday. p. 74-75
1. we can have legitimate anger that we need to submit for guidance on how to deal with it to Jesus, but we cannot allow us to see others as anything less than fully human and in need of God's mercy and care. This is our boundary that cannot be crossed; not by us. Not in our community.
 - a) We should passionately disagree when we need to, and call out the things that get in the way of creating safe, diverse, Jesus-centered space, but it must come in that context. If

we listen to Jesus story and find ourselves saying “Thank God I’m not like that self-righteous prick the Pharisee” then we have missed it. If we allow ourselves to get swept into the social media takedowns between the libtards and the bigots, we have missed it.

- b) Incumbent on us creating safety. - Physical, yes, but emotional too. To be a safe community for a diverse group of people unto Jesus means this. No, valuing safety is not about never being uncomfortable. It is about never being dehumanized. There’s an important difference.

B. We work to restore the vision of humanity in those who are being dehumanized. One example of that this looks like - Black Lives Matter - p.77

- 1. How may we be continually involved in this work of confronting dehumanization and restoring full humanity to those who’ve been dehumanized.

C. As we move together in the journey of imagining a Generous Faithfulness, I believe this must be an important component. Especially in a world where dehumanizing comments are tweeted on a daily basis by one of the most powerful people on the planet, Humanity is in need of communities of rehumanization. If we are to be the Body of Christ, then we are to embody Christ’s project of rehumanizing humanity. We must be a community that communicates not just with what we preach but what we practice a regard for one another and for those we encounter everywhere we go the immense value we see in one another. Because no one is a cockroach. No one is a rat. No one is an ape or a beaver or an alien. No. All of us are image-bearers of a loving God, knit together thoughtfully in our mother’s wombs. All of us are family. Amen.