



Permission to Be Real

If the table in our backyard could talk, it would share some of the best stories.

Our friend Steven made this table for us. It fits six on a regular night and, don't worry, we can fit eight around when needed. The wood is worn now. There are places where years of wear and tear have chipped away at its surface. The chairs that go around it are a bunch of ragtag rescues from Goodwill. Nothing fancy, and nothing matching.

We call it our Commonfolk Table.

And for a while it was the only table in our backyard, which meant just about everything we did back there happened around it. Steven always says, "A shared table is a shared life," and, gosh, is he right about that.

We've held so many celebrations around that table. We hosted an engagement party for our friends Brett and Lindsey around that table. When our friend Drew proposed to his girlfriend, he did it in our backyard at that table. When we rejoiced over the coming arrival of baby Norah with her parents, Kyle and Annie, it happened at that table. I don't know how many family dinners and Fourth of July parties have centered around that table, but more than I could even begin to count. We've also broken the bread of Communion many times around that table.

I truly love that table.

But we've also mourned and lamented around that table. Tears have been shed around that table. We've sat around that table while one of our dear friends confessed their sexual sin to us. We've sat around that table with other parents, trying to figure out how to raise our kids well. Aaron and his friends have invested many long discussions around that table, talking into the wee hours of the night about all the world's problems.

There's just something about that table. It has a way of making you feel at home, making you feel welcome, making you feel safe.

But I guess of all the eventful moments we've spent around that table, one of them stands out in my memory—a night when Aaron and I were talking there with my dad. I'm certain the kids were already sound asleep in their beds, and my mom was either doing our laundry or doing the dishes inside the house. (Thanks, Mom!)

And on this particular evening, the longer we sat there, our discussion started moving toward things that mattered. Not just the latest coaching debacle at the University of Texas or one of my dad's recent golfing adventures, but real-life talk. The kind of talk that makes you lean in closer to each other, truly listening, not just to the words people are speaking, but to what their heart is actually saying.

We were thinking back. We were reminiscing. About me. What I'd been through. What I'd struggled with. And while some dads might still have a knack for holding grudges over what their kids' troubles have cost them and put them through, my dad that night—for whatever reason—was feeling the weight of his own responsibility. "I think we messed up some in raising you, Jamie. I think I could've done better."

My dad can never talk about anything serious without crying. So as I saw his eyes beginning to fill with tears, mine did too. I grabbed his hand and assured him, "No, Dad, it's not your fault. I made my own choices. I walked my own road. No one pushed me or pulled me in the directions I went. My choices were my choices."

I mean, sure, like all parents, they could've done things differently. Like the time when they discovered a boy in my room in the middle of the night. They probably should have punished me a bit more harshly and taken it more seriously. True, they grounded me. Which meant I had to miss the Sadie Hawkins dance that year.

Which is pure tragedy for a junior in high school. To make it even worse, my friends and I had designed a T-shirt for the dance with all our names on the back. How was I supposed to explain why my name was on the back of a T-shirt for an event I couldn't even go to? Oh, the stresses of eleventh grade!

Or like the night when I arrived home later than my curfew and parked my car just a little too close to the garage door. Well, a *lot* too close actually, because my front bumper put a big dent in it, and I wasn't even aware I'd done it. Maybe if they'd assumed the worst, they might have discovered I'd been drinking that night and had driven myself home. Heaven knows I could've caused more damage than just a dent in a garage door, and pulling me off the road entirely for a while wouldn't have been the worst idea in the world.

I'll come back to this high school stretch of my life later in the book, but know for now that even though I was a "good girl" in the eyes of most people, I was also rebelling against my parents and the rules they'd placed on me—rules, I might add, that were completely normal and necessary for a teenager—a fact I realize even more now that I'm a momma myself!

So the truth is still the truth: My parents weren't responsible for my actions. *I was.*

But Dad was in a reflective mood that night. He was hurting. Searching for answers. Trying to make sense of things, the way middle-aged people often do when they look back on their life.

He was trying to say he was sorry. He was trying to say, “I love you.” He was trying to deal with the parts of his life that made him feel regretful, made him feel sad, where he couldn’t help but think he’d failed.

In fact, this whole subject got him thinking about his own father and what had happened the day before he died years earlier. He’d never told me this story before because, if he had, I couldn’t possibly have forgotten it.

He started sharing how his sister had called to say their seriously ill father was stirring and asking to speak to him. “I’m going to put him on the phone, all right?” This was the man, my grandfather, who was the kind of man who could watch his son go three-for-four in a baseball game (meaning, if you’re not too baseball savvy, he had three hits out of his four times at bat) and somehow only find the words to be critical of his one strikeout. This was the man, my grandfather, who withheld approval from his son no matter how actively my dad sought it.

But with his body failing in his final hours on the earth, he whispered the words my dad had longed to hear his entire lifetime—*I love you*. Words that I say to my kids so often, I barely even notice I’m saying them, they’re so automatic. Not until that day had he been told what every child should be told *every* day. In my grandfather’s own way, he was owning his failure. He was saying I’m sorry. He was trying to be free.

In the days following this conversation around our beloved backyard table, I began to think about the various ways we each try to handle our failures, or even what we *perceive* as failures. My grandfather had failed throughout his life to express affection to his son. My dad, though not actually to blame for the mistakes I made as his daughter, carried around with him a secret sadness of failure that could still haunt him to tears without warning. And even I, right here in the middle of parenting our four young kids—and doing my dang best at it—am making so many mistakes at this gig. As much as I enjoy it, raising humans is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Put it together with all the rest of the stuff in my life where I *know* I’ve messed up, and I don’t need any help going to bed at night feeling like a failure.

And if that’s you too—if you feel like a failure, whether at parenting or marriage or friendship or just generally at life, either because of stuff you’re doing today or stuff that’s happened in the past—I want you to hear what I reminded my dad that night. All of us fail. All of us need a Savior. And God is in the business of redeeming our stories so that He will get all glory, not only from our successes, but also from our failures. He wants us to be free.

My story includes a lot of failure. But in reality, it’s a story of redemption. It’s a story of the Father weaving events together in my life to bring me closer to Him. It’s a story of Him redeeming me, not only from big, bad, scary sins, but also from “little” sins I’d

characterized as normal, everyday stuff. (I'm not saying there's anything "normal" about sin; I'm saying we tend to label sins as bigger and smaller.) It's a story of being rescued from what my disobedience had done. It's a story of a girl receiving God's grace . . . like your story is.



I'll never forget the first time I told a friend all the parts of my story I was so ashamed of—the parts of my story that made me feel so utterly alone and embarrassed.

At that point, I could count the number of people on one hand who knew all the stories from my most difficult seasons of life. Every time I started to get the courage to tell someone the things I'd been through and the ways God had shown up, I would grow so timid. I was certain no one could possibly understand what I'd endured because of my poor choices. I always dreaded they would think less of me after hearing where I'd been in my past. Would they only see me for what I'd done, not for what Jesus had done in me? What if they looked at me the same exact way I once looked at myself? *What if? What if? What if?* I lived in a constant fear of "if they only knew." Because if others knew everything about me . . . I was sure they wouldn't like it.

But maybe my friend Maris would be different.

Maris was actually a new friend, but I had this feeling she would be around for a while. We both lived in the Nashville area, and she was dating Steven (the same Steven who built our Commonfolk Table), who was in Aaron's band at the time. We all knew they would get married someday, and I envisioned us being friends forever, which I'm happy to say we still are.

But before I started to open up with her, I laid the groundwork first. I prepped her for what she was about to hear as if I had spent time in the mafia, sold government secrets, or been a target of FBI surveillance. Cloak-and-dagger stuff. By the time I had set up my story, I think she was actually a bit relieved (or maybe disappointed!) that I hadn't done jail time, lived under a code name, or resurfaced as part of a witness protection program. Although I wouldn't put any of those past me!

Still, I had done some awful things in my life. And as we sat together in the living room of my 1940s-era house, while my baby napped in the other room, I shared it all. Really hard things. I had never laid all my cards on the table in front of someone like that.

You wouldn't believe what happened next.

As soon as the words had finally escaped my mouth, my instant impression was a sudden sense of relief. *I had done it.* I had shared my story, out loud, with a real friend, and . . . you know what? It actually felt good to get it all out.

It helped, of course, that I'd been right about Maris. She gave me permission to be real with her. Although she didn't say those exact words, she was willing to listen to what I said, no matter *what* I was going to say. As I poured out my heart to her, she listened. She didn't try to fix me with canned advice, and she reaffirmed all the things she'd seen God do in my life, even in the short time she'd known me. Her permission that day to be real with her was life-giving to me as a friend. (I'm going to talk a lot more about this subject in chapter 8—about how to be the friend who's listening, not just the one who's telling—but for now, a big shout-out to my friend of many years now who allowed me to be open with her about my struggles, and even in seeing my mess, made me feel loved, honored, and important in her world.)

Another thing I should tell you is I learned something profoundly beautiful that day—something that may surprise you. It's this: our stories are not really as unique as we think. The more I've told of my story through the years, I've discovered my struggles are actually quite common. But because we're all so uncomfortable talking about those struggles—or even hearing about them—we walk around with this idea that no one's ever done what *we've* done, ever felt what *we've* felt, ever thought what *we've* thought, ever said what *we've* said.

This is simply not true.

I'd been scared of my story for years because I assumed no one else had battled what I'd battled. But except for the specific details, many others have fought and lost to the same things—if not *those* things, then *other* things of equal weight in their heart and mind. Think of how much unnecessary anguish and self-torment we've endured, as well as how much freedom we've forgone, from seeing ourselves as the only one. When we're not. We're just not.

But I believed the lies that said I was. I believed the lies that said I was forever defined by my story. I believed the lies that said I couldn't afford to open up. I believed the lies that said all the labels I'd assigned to myself were mine to bear, not to be free of.

And nobody, I thought, could ever take those lies away from me.

Remember the book *The Scarlet Letter* that you were most likely supposed to read in high school? I say “supposed to read” in case you were like me and hardly read any of the books you were “supposed to read.” (You'll be proud to know, Mrs. Kelley, I've since read many of the books you said I was “supposed to read” in high school!) The main character in this novel is Hester Prynne, who was caught in adultery and forced to pin the letter “A” to her chest every day. *Adulterer*. The community had branded her this way so that everyone would always know what she had done. She could never escape her past.

I've always felt as though I understood this fictional woman because of seasons in my life when I've imagined a similar letter pinned to my chest. I often felt as though the only thing people would ever see in me—if they only knew—would be the letters *I* knew were invisibly attached there.

Some days I would pin an “F” to my chest. *Fake*. This whole “loving Jesus” thing couldn't possibly be true for a woman like me who'd spent so many years running from Him, disappointing Him, and acting as if He meant nothing to me.

Other days I would pin a “W” on my chest. *Whore*. What kind of girl sleeps around and then thinks she can follow Jesus and be committed to one man for the rest of her life? Surely everyone would think the same thing of me as well.

Many days I would pin a “U” on my chest. *Used*. I assumed this would be my label forever. Because that's what I was. Early in my marriage, I assumed everyone thought this about me and pitied my husband for ending up with a woman who was so tarnished. “He deserved better,” I imagined them saying as they watched me walk into the church . . . with a “U” pinned so obviously on my dress.

Not until years later did I begin to realize that the only one obsessively focused on all these letters was me. This subconscious pinning ritual I went through every morning, walking around and thinking everyone else was seeing what I was wearing, was as

private as my pain. It was a sick game I was playing. Full of guilt and shame, I was the one who demanded I wear those labels. No one was pinning them on me each day except myself.

I'm guessing this might be the same for you. You get up every day, and you pin a letter on your shirt to define who you think you are, then you walk around with that letter as though wearing it is your job. You think you own that letter, but the truth is, it owns *you*. You make the choice every day to allow it to define you.

“A” for *addict*.

“C” for *cutter*.

“U” for *ugly*.

“D” for *depressed*.

“F” for *failure*.

“L” for *loser*.

“M” for *monster*.

“W” for *worthless*.

“T” for *terrible at everything*.

You pin that letter on your chest as if it's your true identity, when in fact those pins were never meant to be worn for the rest of your life. They are not who you are.

The day I shared my story with Maris, I felt as though I was taking off all my letters and laying them in front of her. I was inviting her into my pinning ritual, even while fearing the whole time that she might only validate my letters as being true. I feared she'd

be surprised by all the letters I owned, or embarrassed to have a friend with so many letters to choose from each morning. I feared she'd agree that, yes, I *did* need to keep pinning them on my chest every single day because they indeed represented the words that define me.

That's what we're afraid of, isn't it? We fear that telling someone our story will only make things worse. Even if they're nice to our face, they'll drive home with the shock and surprise still hitting them, still mentally processing it . . . then they'll tell their husbands or other friends . . . then everyone will know *all* our letters, and they'll know they're *all* true. We fear that's what they'll think of us from now on because it's surely what God thinks about us too.

But those are the letters *we've* drawn up. And they don't match up with God's letters. When we spend our days living in fear of what the world would think of us, if they really knew us, we haven't yet believed and trusted the truths He says about us.



If you're a follower of Christ, you've had a conversion experience. Once you were dead in your sin, and then God called you by name, justified you, put His righteousness on you, and made you His child. That's the beauty of the gospel.

There are moments when I can't even wrap my brain around this concept, and yet . . . there it is. Thank goodness we don't need to completely understand it in order to completely receive it and completely live it.

There's a particular conversion story described in the Bible that I simply can't get enough of. Every single story of someone following Jesus is worth rejoicing over, but there's something truly amazing about someone who used to kill Christians and then actually became one himself. Doesn't make a lot of sense, right?! Movie-worthy, for sure.

His name was Saul. (You've probably heard of him.) The first time we see his name in the Bible is when the self-righteous defenders of God were stoning a man named Stephen for daring to say that Jesus was the Son of God who'd come in fulfillment of the Scriptures these people claimed to believe. They "laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58) since they had no doubt "Saul approved of his execution" (Acts 8:1). Saul was known as someone who was "ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

Listen, Saul wasn't playing around with persecuting Christian believers. He wasn't the kind of guy you'd want to invite over for dinner! And definitely not the kind of person you'd imagine would one day put himself at constant risk by defending the church

with his life and boldly declaring his belief in Jesus Christ—the kind of man who would end up writing more books of our New Testament than anyone else. Because let me remind you, HE WAS KILLING CHRISTIANS.

But as God often does, He interrupted Saul's life. He revealed Himself to him while Saul was literally on the way to find “any men and women who belonged to the Way” (a common name for early Christians), so that “he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2). One day he was killing Christians, and soon thereafter he was preaching the gospel of Jesus to those around him. The change was so dramatic, he even took a new name. The imprisoning Saul became the apostle Paul.

Let's take a second here and imagine the pinning process that Paul the Christian might have gone through each morning when he was putting on his cloak each day and fastening his sandals on his feet. We'll mention just the big one—“M” for murderer. Because, remember, HE KILLED CHRISTIANS.

Even a tough guy like Paul must have wrestled with these memories from his past. He must have wished a million times he'd never done the kinds of horrible things he'd been guilty of committing. Part of him must have loved nothing better than sweeping it all under the rug and never talking about it, imagining how much more freely he could share and minister God's

love if he hadn't maligned and misunderstood it for so much of his life.

And yet his story actually set the table for the message he was declaring. His story gave the living-proof evidence of the salvation he was trying to put into words. I mean, look, his words are still ministering to us thousands of years after he wrote them! If he hadn't been willing to offer up his whole life as a witness to God's grace, someone else would have needed to do it. This was God's plan for what He wanted to do through Paul, and he was not afraid to embrace it.

This is why I love Paul so much. His story is what makes me believe that no one is immune to the love of God through Christ. *No one.* Not you. Not me. Not the woman who drove drunk and killed a family. Not your neighbor who's addicted to pain pills. Not the man down the street who drove his wife away by his constant abuse. Not the member of ISIS who's killing Christians. Not the woman who's undergone numerous abortions. Not the couple who've both cheated on each other and disgraced their marriage. Not the girl who sleeps around with anyone who'll have her. No one is too far gone to be rescued by the love and grace of God.

And while sin does come with consequences—none greater than the consequence of Jesus Christ willingly suffering death in our place on a bloody cross—salvation comes with a new identity.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

So when God said, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15), and he has been killing Christians, we can believe that God can say those things about us, no matter what we have done. God can look at you and me—and at all our sins and rebellion He’s overcome in us—and see us, too, as instruments in His hand for whatever purpose He’s chosen us to be and become.

We are not our letters anymore.

We belong to a new Storyteller.

You may be thinking, *What does that even mean?* I’m so glad you asked! I’ll tell you both what it does mean and what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean our stories go away. In Paul’s case, since his cruel reputation was so public, he could hardly avoid the scrutiny of it. Whenever he showed up in a synagogue, the stories of his previous lifestyle had already preceded him. And yet he deliberately chose to own it, not excuse it, throughout the unfolding of Scripture. That’s because his story, like our story, is a representation of the gospel. Despite the enormity of Paul’s sin, God had reached out and grabbed him and turned his life upside down. God hadn’t erased his story; He had actually authored it for a purpose. An unbelievably glorious purpose.

We can learn a thing or two from Paul about being real with people. He knew what was at stake when sharing the struggles of his past with the people he lived and worked around. In his letter to the Galatians, he used his story to remind them just how real and undeniable the gospel of Jesus truly is. By reminding them what he'd done in his "former life," how he'd "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal. 1:13), he was laying all his cards on the table. No guesswork was needed for seeing exactly who Paul had been. But he did it for one overarching reason. When people kept hearing how "he who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy," here's what happened: "They glorified God because of me" (Gal. 1:23–24).

They glorified God because of me.

The first time I read this, I choked up. "They glorified God because of me," he said—not just the new Paul, but the old one. ALL OF HIM. God wasn't limited to getting glory from what Paul had finally become; He also received glory from what He'd done with the poor choices Paul had made all along. God had chosen Paul to be a vessel of the gospel before the beginning of time. Nothing that Paul said or did was a surprise to God, yet it was all being used to bring God glory. All of it.

Paul knew something I'm slowly starting to realize as I follow Jesus more and learn to trust His words to be true. He knew and believed that God was bigger than his past. Instead of being

held back by his failures, he was pushed forward to continue proclaiming the truth of the gospel, even in how it was fleshed out through his own indefensible mistakes.

Wow, this is such good news for us. You and I can do this too! Because if God could use a man with a past like Paul's, then surely He can use us as well. If God could love a man who killed people who were following Jesus, then surely He can love us as well. If God could allow a murderer to do amazing things for His kingdom, then surely He can use us for His glory as well. We can own our story because it's actually a testimony to the Good News of Jesus, who loves us, pursues us, and saves us in spite of ourselves.

Just as Paul said, "They glorified God because of me," we can say the same thing. We can be people who share our hurts, share our struggles, share our failures, share our stories. And we can trust without a doubt that God will get glory from it . . . from ALL of it.



So just as my friend Maris granted me full permission to be real with her, I'm doing the same for you. I'm giving you permission to let down your guard, to lay down all the pins you've worn on your chest for all these years, and to let God woo you into His love and grace.

If you were sitting around my backyard table with me, and we were chatting, I'd want you to feel as though you were safe, that your story is welcome with me. But since we're meeting instead around the table legs of this book right now, I'm doing the same thing by choosing to go first. I'm going to tell you parts of my story that are sacred and sometimes hard to say out loud because I want you to know you can do that too.

I'm taking off my pins. Every single one of them.

And may God be glorified through what we're doing together.