

Luke 7:36-50

Today we meet Jesus at a table again. You might remember that last week Jesus was called a glutton and a drunkard – this only shows he placed enormous stress on eating with people, on table fellowship. Because he ate with sinners and tax collectors, we should not be surprised that he ate with Pharisees and religious leaders too. In a sense he managed to avoid what we often do – in our righteous indignation at someone else’s lack of tolerance, we show our own lack of tolerance that’s quite shocking. Certainly much of today’s politics has deteriorated into an ever-descending spiral of lack of tolerance for views other than our own. Jesus, even though he deeply disagreed with the Pharisees on matters of great importance to him, still took time to share meals and table fellowship with them. Good example to follow.

As he’s with the great of his community, a woman barges in. We don’t know whether Jesus knew her or not – it might be that he actually forgave her sins beforehand and out of deep gratitude she came in to honour him at that table. This actually makes more sense than her simply barging in to a Pharisee’s house unannounced and uninvited. However what we do know is that Simon knows her – or better – he knows of her. He doesn’t know her as a person but he knows of her reputation. He labels her, puts her in a box and thus dehumanises her.

At this stage it’s important to note that we don’t know what her sin consisted of. The word used in Greek is the same one used by Peter when he said to Jesus: I am a sinner. Should we presume prostitution was the only sin a first century woman was capable of? Isn’t that the same attitude that Simon the Pharisee displayed? Let’s leave it at that – whatever she has done, the whole town knew of it and judged her for it.

There is no confrontation as such to start with. Simon simply thinks that if Jesus knew what she was, he wouldn’t have accepted her devotion. I’m struck how Jesus could read minds. Certainly Simon’s – that’s when he replies with a story illustrating his point. But also the woman’s – he knows exactly why she did what she did even if we don’t get to ‘hear’ her thoughts as directly as we did Simon’s. Jesus can read minds – that’s terrifying and more often than not – very embarrassing. We’re an open book to him.

Then Jesus offers forgiveness. That’s what’s turning the world upside down. Because on one hand it’s a restoration of a relationship. We can begin again and are given a second chance. But most importantly we’re given our very selves back. When we’ve been unforgiven long enough, we begin to define ourselves by the mistakes we’ve made. We put ourselves in a box – guilty. Our mistakes, our past defines us. When we are forgiven though, that definition – which is seriously limiting and falsifying who we truly are – disappears. We can be fully ourselves again. Nothing defines us except for God’s love for us. We’re loved.

Jesus says to the woman: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Where does one go though? She’s a different person now but where does she go where she can begin again?

The whole community around her sees her as a sinner and so defines her by her past behavior. Where does she go?

Rev James Moor in his sermon 'A Place of Welcome' recalls this sobering story: 'Phillip Yancey tells the story of a friend of his in Chicago who worked with poor persons in the city. He was visited once by a prostitute who was in dire straits. She had been renting out her two-year old daughter to men for sex in order to support her drug habit; and she was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for herself or her daughter. Yancey's friend asked if she had thought about going to a church for help, and the woman seemed horrified. "Church?! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse." She had experienced church as a place of judgment and inhospitality.

In his commentary on our text Fred Craddock wonders where one goes when told to go in peace as Jesus instructs this woman to do at the end of our story. "What she needs," Craddock says, "is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story," he says, "screams the need for a church, one that says you are welcome here."¹

That's a challenge as we'd rather be like Simon than like Jesus. It's so easy to gossip, judge and condemn. You've probably been faced with people who you know approach you just in order to judge. They feign friendship looking for faults all the time. Maybe you are such a person yourself at times. That is human frailty and certainly the easier way.

It is not easy to forgive and allow people to start again. Because we remember what they were like even if they have forgotten. Maybe because we feel that if we condemn others, this somehow clears us of guilt, that our mistakes and sins look lesser in comparison. Like Simon, we often don't even admit we need to be forgiven and therefore live limited lives while invited to a life in fullness. But that's certainly not how God's Kingdom operates. James Moor offers the following story:

'There is an old legend about Judas that Madeleine L'Engle tells. The legend is that after his death Judas found himself at the bottom of a deep and slimy pit. For thousands of years he wept his repentance, and when the tears were finally spent, he looked up and saw way, way up a tiny glimmer of light. After he had contemplated it for another thousand years or so, he began to try to climb up towards the light. The walls of the pit were dark and slimy, and he kept slipping back down. Finally, after great effort, he neared the top and then he slipped and fell all the way back down to the bottom. It took him many years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of grief and repentance, and then he started to climb up again. After many more falls and efforts and failures, he reached the top and dragged himself into an upper room with twelve people seated around the table. "We've been waiting for you, Judas," Jesus said. "We couldn't begin till you came."²

¹ http://day1.org/1048-a_place_of_welcome.

² http://day1.org/1048-a_place_of_welcome.

Deep down we all crave such unconditional acceptance and love. It's offered to us if we only want to receive it. We need not define ourselves and others by the past mistakes. The slate has been wiped clean. The future is ahead. Amen.