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“The People Jesus Loved”

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Luke 7:36-8:3

During Lent this year we have been examining Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. We have considered his childhood and youth, his temptation and ministry, and how he taught his followers that being his disciple is far more than believing the right things. It is a complete way of life which involves making him Lord of your life, and then resolving to become like him. Today we continue to examine these portraits of Jesus by considering some of the people Jesus loved. Now of course we all know that Jesus loved everyone—saint and sinner, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. But he did have a special place in his heart for the lonely, sick and forgotten. His values were deeply grounded in Hebrew Scripture, where 3 groups of people were described as worthy of special kindness and care: widows, orphans and strangers. He also had a special concern for those who were hated by others and considered inferior.

In Jesus day things were not that much different than they are today. In Judaism in the Palestinian state under Roman rule we find that people hated each other and created many artificial divisions. First, there was the discrimination based upon religion. This was more widespread than any other form of discrimination in the ancient world. The Sadducees were the religious aristocracy of Jesus day and there were only a few hundred of them. But they had tremendous power and wealth, and they controlled the high priesthood, the temple functions, and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. They interpreted the Bible a certain way and believed that they were right and everyone else was wrong.

Then there were the Pharisees who numbered 4 to 5 thousand in Jesus day. They were the teachers in the synagogues. They interpreted the law for the common people, and had far more widespread influence over the common people than did the Sadducees. They were convinced that you had to be pure, observant, and they did not like the Sadducees at all. Then you had the Essenes who were monastic Jews who believed everyone else was going to hell and you needed to withdraw from society to know God. Society was so corrupt that you needed to serve God in total isolation. The Essenes produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they too believed they were right and everyone else was wrong.

Then there were large numbers of people who did not belong to any of those groups and were just your ordinary, run of the mill Jews. They went to synagogue, tried to follow the Ten Commandments. But the vast majority were not religious at all. They had no use for God or religious observances.

So there were numerous religious and non-religious groups in Jesus day, and for the most part they hated each other. In addition to that you had distinct regional differences. Israel in those days was divided into 3 parts. The north, near

the Sea of Galilee where Jesus grew up and spent most of his ministry. The south was the region of Judea where the Temple was in Jerusalem, and in the center was the region of Samaria, sandwiched between the two. The folks in Jerusalem considered the Galileans hicks and bumpkins. The folks in Galilee thought the people down in Judea were conceited and pompous. But those in Samaria were the worst. Their ancestors had intermarried with Gentiles so they were not pure Jews and were despised, in fact most Jews called them dogs. Additionally, there were the Gentiles, who were not allowed to eat or socialize with the Jews and then worst of all, even worse than the Samaritans were the Roman soldiers. These people were resented and hated more than anyone.

But what we find as we read the New Testament, is that Jesus loved them all. Of course, he was critical of different groups at different times, like the Sadducees and Pharisees, he nevertheless tried to reach them and offer his message of grace and love. There is no other human being who has ever lived who saw past all of the artificial categories we construct and just saw lovable human beings created in the image of God. Jesus had a very special place in his heart for the poor, the afflicted and forgotten. The mentally ill, sinners and outcasts were of special concern. And when he saw those who were beaten up, hated, or rejected, he reached out to them, just as you would reach out to one of your children who was beaten up or rejected. In Luke, chapter 5 we are told of how Jesus even cared for the most hideous and despised people of his day--lepers. They had to yell 'unclean' as they walked down the street and nobody could touch or even speak to them. But Jesus not only spoke to lepers, he touched them. He befriended them.

Luke makes a point of stressing how Jesus reached out to those people everyone else despised. Only in Luke do we find a story about a hated Samaritan acting as a good guy. The only one who cared about the man who was beaten and left by the side of the road was a despicable Samaritan. Not the priest, not the Levite, but a Samaritan.

Again, only in Luke do we have the story of a wayward child, a boy known as prodigal, who takes his inheritance early and squanders it on loose living. He is hungry, broke, lonely, and afraid to go back home. But when he has nowhere left to turn, he decides to return home and try to work as a servant. There he finds that his father never stopped loving him, and is there to welcome him with open arms. There were so many examples from Luke I could have selected to illustrate the sort of people Jesus loved, but I thought it would be helpful to consider the passage where Jesus has been invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee to eat. Simon is a wealthy man and he invites all of his Pharisee friends over, because this is a big deal hosting Jesus. So all of these men are gathered around the table on

pillows on the floor, while the women are in the kitchen. In the middle of this meal there is a knock on the door and standing there is the town prostitute. She is probably dressed provocatively, and says, "I need to see Jesus." The servant says, "He is busy right now." She forces her way in, saying "I have to see him now." She walks right over to Jesus, holding a jar. She sees him and begins to cry. She falls on her knees, and her tears fall all over his feet. She begins to kiss his feet and anoint them with the ointment in her jar. She begins to undo her hair, and dries his feet with her hair. Can you imagine the thoughts of the men sitting around that room? "What is she doing here? And touching him and crying over him? Doesn't Jesus know what kind of woman she is?" They see only who she is and what she has been. But Jesus sees who she can be. He sees a woman acting out of love who is worthy of his respect and kindness.

To fully appreciate the love Jesus has for this prostitute, you need to understand that in first century Judaism even respectable women were not considered equal to men, to say the least. All women were considered inferior intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. Men and women did not eat together or worship together in the synagogues. If a woman gave birth to a boy there was great celebration, but girls were not celebrated. A very common prayer in Jesus day, according to William Barclay was this: "O God I thank thee that I am not a slave, a Gentile, or a woman." Respectable women were considered inferior, let alone a prostitute. And yet Jesus loves this woman and says she has done a beautiful thing. We cannot imagine how shocking that was.

New Testament scholar Alfred Plummer, writing in 1896 called Luke the Gospel of Womanhood. Nearly 1/3 of the material unique to Luke deals directly with women. Luke teaches us that Jesus loved women, no doubt in part because they were considered so inferior. And Luke gives us more detail about the women around Jesus than any other Gospel.

Luke alone tells us the story of Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary and mother of John the Baptist. Luke alone tells of the expected birth of Jesus from Mary's perspective. Her beautiful song of praise the Magnificat gives us a feminine perspective on the birth of Christ. Then a woman, Anna the prophetess comes into the temple and recognizes this baby is the Messiah. This is so unusual, you rarely heard about holy women in the temple. Then Luke tells us that Jesus' first miracles had to do with women-- the healing of Peter's mother in law, how he brought back to life the widow's son who had died, he healed the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, he befriended Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Susanna. We are told that women traveled with Jesus and supported him. How do you think his ministry funded these 3 years? Luke Chapter 8 says, "And the 12

were with him and also some women...Mary called Magdalene from whom 7 demons had gone out, Joanna, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.” These women were his disciples, followers, supporters, and made his ministry happen. Women were benefactors of Jesus and this was extraordinary. It happened only because he allowed and encouraged it.

The fact that women traveled with him and learned from him was remarkable. We see another example of this in the home of his friends Mary and Martha. Luke, Chapter 10 tells us that while at their home teaching a group of people, Mary comes and sits at his feet. Her sister Martha complains that her sister is not helping her in the kitchen, but Jesus says Mary has chosen the right thing by learning from him. Luke shows us how Jesus loved and empowered the women in his life.

So what happened? I could take you today to churches right in the greater Denver metro area today, that will not allow women to be ushers, greeters, communion servers, Scripture readers, pastors, or leaders in the church. They have completely missed the liberating message of Jesus, choosing to take some letters of Paul out of their original context which say women shall keep silent in church and never have authority over men. And yet women were his students, supporters and disciples.

Luke, more than any other Gospel, shows us that women, Samaritans and lepers, widows, orphans and strangers, the sick, the lost, the outcast—were all people Jesus loved.

So, that leaves the successful and the strong, those people with power and privilege. Did Jesus not care about the fortunate, the content, the successful? Of course Jesus loved them too. In his encounters with the privileged and powerful he expressed compassion and concern.. We see him with the rich young ruler and Nicodemus who comes to him in the night asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus had mercy upon them, and invites them to let go of the things and lifestyles that enslave them and embrace the new life that he alone can give. He invites them to reconsider their priorities and live a more balanced life. Ultimately, Jesus had compassion upon those who were rich and those who were poor, those who were powerful and those who were powerless. His love was large enough for everybody.

So what do we learn from Luke’s Gospel this week? That Jesus had more than enough love for everyone, then and now. And that includes you. He loves you when you are happy and when you are sad, when you are good and when you are bad. The Good News of the Gospel is simply this: The God we meet in Jesus Christ loves you, and he loves you all the time.

Let us pray...

Help us Gracious God to love as Jesus loved—the outcast, the sinner, the lost, the oppressed. Help us also to love the successful, the powerful, the people we envy and resent. For all are created in your image, and all need our compassion and care. Help us to love you, O God, our neighbors, and even ourselves. For when we love we bring joy to others and blessing to ourselves. Today we thank you for this good life. Forgive us when we do not love it enough. Amen.