

Teaching: Winter-Spring 2021



The theme for the coming term will be to explore what it means to 'leave the ninety-nine'. We will look at what this tells us about the heart (motivation) of God and the mission of God. We will explore welcome – who is welcome and what does welcome actually mean. We will look at examples of how Jesus engages with 'the least, the last and the lost'.

Sunday 7th February, 2021

Reading: (NRSV)

Luke 7:38-50

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 41 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' 43 Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' 44 Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' 48 Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' 50 And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Questions:

1. We know that Jesus was known for entering the homes of 'sinners' (Mark 2:15, Luke 19:10) Why do you think he entered the home of a Pharisee and sat and ate with him?
2. Sally made a point of imagining what the woman might have been thinking and feeling when she decided to enter the home of the Pharisee. What was she thinking? How was she feeling?
3. In verse 39 the Pharisees are drawing a clear connection between being a prophet (one of God's mouthpieces) and recognising the sinfulness of the woman (with whom a prophet should not identify). Does this kind of thinking still prevail in the church today? If so, who comes to mind as those the church might choose to keep at arm's length?
4. As evangelicals we have this understanding that *all* are sinful and so *all* in the same boat; it's the great equaliser. But Jesus seems to bring a different take on this, stating that there are some who's greater sin means that they are more thankful. Is this just playing with words? What thankfulness do we honestly have about our own forgiveness?
5. The final words Jesus speaks, 'Go in peace' indicate an absence of guilt, shame, worry as the woman is restored to God and restored to others. Invite each other to share what that restored peace means for you.

Prayer

Jesus, forgive my sins.

Forgive the sins that I can remember, and also the sins I have forgotten.

Forgive the wrong actions I have committed, and the right actions I have omitted.

Forgive the times I have been weak in the face of temptation, and those when I have been stubborn in the face of correction.

Forgive the times I have been proud of my own achievements, and those when I have failed to boast of your works.

Forgive the harsh judgements I have made of others, and the leniency I show to myself.

Forgive the lies I have told to others, and the truths I have avoided.

Forgive me the pain I have caused others, and the indulgence I have shown to myself.

Jesus have pity on me, and make me whole.

Columba's Affirmation

Alone with none but Thee, my God,

I journey on my way;

What need I fear, when Thou art near,

O king of night and day?

More safe I am within Thy hand,

than if a host did round me stand.

My destined time is fixed by Thee,

and death doth know his hour.

Did warriors strong around me throng,

they could not stay his power;

no walls of stone can man defend

when Thou Thy messenger dost send

My life I yield to Thy decree,

and bow to Thy control

in peaceful calm, for from Thine arm

no power can wrest my soul.

Could earthly omens e'er appal

A man that heeds the heavenly call!

**The child of God can fear no ill,
His chosen dread no foe;
we leave our fate with Thee and wait
Thy bidding when we go.
Tis not from chance our comfort springs,
Thou art our trust, O king of kings.**

St Columba

Pray for your heart to be softened and made more welcoming.

Text of the Sermon

Leave the 99 – Who are the lost ones?

Luke 7:36-50

Today we'll be continuing on the theme we were introduced to at the start of the year – about 'leaving the 99'.

Today we start to look at who it is that lost – who is that one sheep that Jesus says the shepherd will go after. We'll be looking at a passage from Luke's gospel that takes place in someone's house. And it's a story that shows us who one of those lost sheep is.

The passage is from Luke, 7:36-50 and is the story of Jesus being invited to dine at a Pharisee's house – his name is Simon. And a woman, known to be a sinner, arrives at the house and the story unfolds from there. I'll read parts of the passage as we go along.

So here I am, in my house, at my dining table, the same place where today's story takes place. We haven't had anyone else at our dining table for a long time, and it breaks my heart because I love having people around our table. But we're all in the same boat.

You know when you go round to someone's house, there's the greeting ritual that goes on. Depending on how well you know the people you might shake hands, give hugs or kiss on the cheek – one cheek, two cheeks or repeat cheeks. It's awfully confusing and we've all had those awkward moments of do I, don't I, which cheek first, repeat etc... and oops you meet in the middle! Very embarrassing. We have some very good friends that are from India. When we go round to their house, we are always offered some water to drink. And more often than not, we refuse politely. But my friend, after a few visits, pulled me aside and gently informed me that it was customary to offer water because of visitors in India travelling distance in hot weather, and it was actually rude to refuse a glass of water. So since then I have gratefully received whatever I've been offered when we go their house. We have these traditions don't we, some cultures have them more engrained into their behaviours that us British people who aren't sure whether to shake, hug or kiss.

So, wind the clock back 2,000 years and to another part of the world... and you have some very different cultural expectations.

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

It was normal and expected culture to offer some water for your guest to wash his feet, give him a welcome kiss, and anoint their head / forehead with a little oil as a blessing. But Jesus didn't get this welcome, as we'll later see.

So they're reclining at the table, not sitting at one like we do. There would have been cushions and rugs and everyone would have been reclining, leaning towards the food in the middle. All enjoying a nice meal, best china, polished silverware – you get the picture. Then something unthinkable happens...

37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.

We don't know what sinful life she was accused of, that's irrelevant here. But we know that she was labelled, probably ostracised by her community and shamed. How much courage did it take that woman to come into the house of a Pharisee – one who knows the law inside out and makes a point to live it out too. So now that

everyone's jaws are on the floor, aghast that this 'sinful woman' has come into the Simon the Pharisee's house...

38 As she stood behind Jesus, at his feet weeping...

Why was she crying at this point? I reckon she'd heard about this Messiah who could forgive sins. Coming from a place of shame and repentance, she came knowing that this man Jesus could forgive her and she was already feeling the release from her entrapment and condemnation.

It goes on... she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair. Hold on a minute. No respectful woman in that culture would have uncovered and let down her hair in public. This was an unfettered show of love and appreciation. She was washing Jesus' feet and drying them with her hair, that was a normal act of welcome to a guest, she was welcoming him into her life. Offering him the welcome any self-respecting host would have given a guest.

It goes on, still in verse **38... she kissed his feet.**

Again, another act of welcome, and then she poured perfume on his feet. She anointed Jesus' feet. The final act of an honourable welcome. Washing his feet, kissing him and anointing him. So...

V39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner."

So Simon the Pharisee is sitting there – not only outraged that this 'woman of sin' has come into his house, but he's puffed his chest up all pious, reminding himself that he knows the law and what is right and wrong and thinks to himself... if this man were a prophet he would know too. He's thinking that if Jesus would have been concerned about his own reputation like the Pharisees, then he would not have allowed this sinful woman to touch him.

Jesus doesn't miss a thing. He tells Simon he has something to tell him:

V41 "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

So you can imagine Simon the Pharisee feeling all self-righteous now, he guessed Jesus' riddle correctly. But Jesus isn't finished...

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

Wow. In one short statement, Jesus has done two things. Firstly, he has noticed the woman, lifted her up, made a model of her and her behaviour and acknowledged her and said her sins were forgiven. Let's just stop there – I know that's a lot of things, but that's still my first point. Think back to the state this woman arrived in, disassociated, ashamed, shunned. Now, after her beautiful acts of worship and welcome, Jesus has made an example of her, using her to point out what was lacking in the Pharisee. The fact that he let the woman touch his feet but then went on to defend her, shows how much he really cared about this woman. Jesus is demonstrating that it's not just enough to strictly obey the Old Testament law. Jesus showed true concern and love towards this woman. And the second thing Jesus did was make Simon the Pharisee realise how little he knows, how little he loves and accepts those that need more forgiveness than him. He's really given Simon a piece of humble pie to eat at his own dinner party.

When God's kingdom is revealed, the normal expectations are turned on its head. This is what happened in Simon's house. What Simon thought was the normal way to deal with situations turned out to be totally the opposite. One of ABC's statements in our mission is to 'reveal the kingdom of God'. Think about this story of Jesus, Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman, this is a snapshot of what the kingdom of God looks like in practice. How would that play out in ABC? The kingdom of God is a place of generosity and grace, as shown by Jesus in this story. But don't forget about Simon the Pharisee, who Jesus used an illustration to open his

mind to the kingdom values of grace and forgiveness. Simon's perception of righteousness caused him to show disdain towards this woman and wanting to distance himself from her. But Jesus' righteousness draws the woman to him with forgiveness and blessing of peace.

Because forgiveness and love set new standards, they raise new expectations for Pharisees like Simon and also, forgiveness and love raise new expectations for sinners like the woman in this story. Forgiveness and love set new standards

48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

So the lost sheep? Yes, it's the woman in this story. A person who was so far from God's kingdom, so far away from the flock of 99, so unimaginable for a person like that to be seen in respectable company. Jesus acknowledged her acts of welcome, saw her faith and repentant heart. He forgave her. Who do we know who is lost like this woman? Who are we in this story? Are we followers of the Pharisee – with our own understanding of righteousness, or are we followers of Jesus?

50 Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

So where must this woman go? Back to the streets with other people like herself? No she is a forgiven sinner. What am I? What are you? We are a community of forgiven sinners. A community that says to other forgiven sinners "you are welcome here".