

Faith and Obedience

a sermon preached on the

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Luke 7:36 - 8:3

Luke sometimes pairs off the story of a man with a corresponding story about a woman. Invariably the woman will be shown as more open to faith than the man. For instance, Zechariah and Mary both received angelic annunciations, but Zechariah's doubting was in sharp contrast to Mary's faith and obedience.

In this story we meet the man Simon – a Pharisee of great standing in the community. Simon was very concerned about the strict adherence and obedience of the law. Part of that law says that a Rabbi should stay at a safe distance from a woman. Therefore, when this unnamed woman with a bad reputation entered the banquet hall, poor Simon nearly had a fit, and started talking to himself saying, "If this man Jesus were a prophet, he would know who this woman is who is touching him, and what a reputation she has."

However, Jesus knew all about this woman and he knew what Simon was thinking, so he turned the tables on Simon and his judgemental attitude by pointing out that he was the one who was guilty of poor hospitality - almost as much of a social blunder as the woman letting down her hair and touching Jesus. This woman needed to put her life together, and she had found the source of reconciliation in Jesus.

It is interesting to note how this woman came to confession. Her language was made up of tears, kisses and touch. Jesus did not ask her any naive questions about her life. Lucky for her she did not come along centuries later in search of reconciliation – a wooden grill would not have understood her tears nor responded to her deep need of touch as being in the presence of Jesus had!!

On the Mount of Olives, at a spot which looks across the Kidron valley, toward the temple area of Jerusalem, there is a small chapel designed in the shape of a tear drop which recalls the tears Jesus shed over Jerusalem. On each of the four corners on the roof, there is a stone jar, recalling the custom that a woman would save up her tears to be the most precious sign of her devotion to a loved one. The woman who gate-crashed the banquet at the house of Simon brought an alabaster jar of expensive ointment, but her gift of tears was far more precious and personal. She poured her tears over his feet, and Jesus recognised that her tears were her greatest expression of devotion, repentance and love.

There are many in our society who won't accept the possibility that people can change. They are not willing to give someone a second chance. A culture that doesn't believe in redemption and forgiveness is a culture without hope. Jesus knew all about this woman's reputation, but he saw that there was another and better side to her. He saw that she was earnestly seeking to alter her way of life. He saw that she wanted to be seen as a person not as an object. By graciously accepting her humble and loving service, he helped her to believe in herself, and gave her the confidence she needed to change her life.

It is very wonderful to feel that somebody has confidence in us - that we are not judged or condemned, but loved. We have to learn to see the goodness in one another, and affirm that side of a person. We can't change anyone unless we accept them as they are. Condemnation does not liberate - it oppresses. Jesus did not condemn her – he saw her sorrow, her humility, her

courage and her love. He affirmed this side of her. She had never experienced anything like this before. Jesus was the best person she had ever met. She was not only forgiven, she was loved by him. By treating her with kindness and compassion, he helped her believe in her own goodness. Had he treated her with disdain, he would have sent her back to the darkness from which she had come. As a result of her encounter with Jesus, she began to live a new life. By welcoming her as he did, and graciously accepting her gift of tears, Jesus gave her the gift of God's forgiveness, hope and love.

There is a message of outreach in this Gospel for all who follow Christ, and none more so than our community of faith here at St Luke's. It is all very good for us as we sit in the comfort of the Vestry and discuss the poverty of the marginalised and those in need of help and love. It is another thing to embrace them, listen to them and meet them where "they" are at on their life's journey. Do we treat them with disdain and dismiss them, or do we follow the example of Jesus and accept them graciously, lovingly and endeavour to give them some hope?

Let us remember the commandment of Christ: LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

Amen.

References: F. McCarthy, S. O'Flynn, T. Wright