

Classless

December 11, 2016

Luke 7:36-43

We've all been picked on for something we had no control over. It's dehumanizing. In all likelihood, you've also picked on others. It's such a strange thing. It's such a human thing. The easiest way to feel superior is to find a person or group we feel is inferior and power up. And we've probably all been guilty of that outwardly or inwardly.

True story. I was sent to the principal's office in grade school for picking on kids who were picking on other kids. Mother wasn't sure whether to punish me or commend me but I was warned by our principle Miss Ashworth to stop my vigilante justice.

In first century culture, the entire structure of society was built on

hierarchy. Ancient people were obsessed with the aristocracy. It was unthinkable that all people were created equal. Today we are obsessed with egalitarianism. How did that change? What happened to change that fundamental idea?

Jesus happened. One of the reasons Jesus came into the world was to change all that. During His earthly ministry, Jesus introduced the idea that all people are valuable. He elevated the dignity of people through his teachings, his interactions and through his death. Because Jesus is God, He was able to live without adjectives and labels. There were not "good" and "bad" people, no "in" and "out" people. For Jesus there were only *people*. We see it clearly in a story found in Luke chapter 7, beginning with verse 36:

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.

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. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ 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."

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹ "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,^[a] and the other fifty. ⁴² 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?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

This is a story of contrasts. First of all there is the Pharisee. We know his name because he's prominent. His name is Simon. Evidently he is a well-respected man who probably is well-to-do, because he is having a banquet to which he has invited Jesus. It seems Simon is concerned about appearances, because when you read these verses you get the feeling part of his motivation for inviting Jesus was because Jesus was a well-known evangelist. Simon thought, *It would really help my image to invite this well-known itinerant preacher into my home and to entertain him.*

Simon's attitude is anything but beautiful. He is critical; he second-guesses Jesus when he accepts the gratitude of this sinful woman. He is super spiritual; he says, "If Jesus were a prophet, he could have discerned the

kind of woman that she is." He is self-righteous and proud.

On the other hand, there is the woman whose name we do not know. Some people speculate this is Mary Magdalene. We don't have any proof it's Mary. We know she is a sinful woman and she has lived a sinful life. It is probable she is a prostitute and a prominent person in the sense that her lifestyle is well-known around town.

So when she appears, you can understand the horror of Simon the Pharisee. He didn't even want her on his property. But her attitude is one of humility. It says that she came up behind Jesus and, weeping, began to wash his feet. She didn't even feel she could come around front.

Notice the way she honors Jesus. She wipes his feet with her hair. She kisses his feet. This woman who was used to blatancy and doing brazen things, now

expresses an attitude of honor. Notice also, if you will, her spiritual extravagance. In gratitude, she pours the perfume on the feet of Jesus. She's giving.

Do you see the contrast? Simon always had been a good person. He's always had what he needed. Things have always gone well in his life. He's always been considered a well-respected person in the community. Not so with the woman. There was a lot of contrast in her life. Simon resents her breaking into the middle of this special dinner he is giving to Jesus and to others who had accompanied him. But Jesus stops and drives home a point with a story about two people who owed a lot of money they could never pay back. And Simon seems to get it. He was comparing his life to this woman's life and figured he was looking pretty good. In one simple act, Jesus elevates the status of everyone.

Peter

Watching this drama unfold in Simon's house is Peter. And you would think that he would have watched this and said to himself, "Now I get it. Everyone is equal in God's eyes" But he doesn't. At the time Jewish people saw themselves as inherently better or more acceptable to God than gentiles.

Peter was a man who had to come face to face with this problem. This problem of diversity. This problem of difference. This problem of unity. Peter was a staunch Jew. He was proud to be Jewish. He was committed to being Jewish and was faithfully Jewish. One day while having devotions on the top of his roof, God gave him a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven with all manner of food on it. Peter said, "Not so Lord. Not so. I can't eat that unclean food, the food that the Gentiles eat."

God then gave him a lesson of a lifetime. "Don't call unclean what I call clean. Don't use your past standards to govern your present actions. This is a new ballgame now. I've created a new entity called the church."

He was then sent down to the home of Cornelius, where he introduced Gentiles to the new reality of a savior. And when Peter sees them accept the gospel message, he says, "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*" It seems Peter now gets it.

This cross-cultural experience made such a great impact that he even went over to dine with the Gentiles on their side of town.

That dinner event is recorded for us in Galatians 2. Finally, he had the chance to eat Gentile food. So he goes to the bad part of town, and goes dining where the

Gentiles were living. He'd always wanted to taste pig feet and ham loaf. He always wanted to know what bacon and pork chops tasted like. There he had his opportunity, ordained by God.

And so we find him dining with the Gentiles. He was discovering that he could have fellowship with people who were different than he was. Finding out what all the hoopla was all about regarding their background, their history, their worldview, and their diet. What he was finding out was all the good cooking he had been missing in all of his years as a Jew.

In fact, he had even brought some of his Jewish friends with him and they were all seated and dining together. But a problem occurred in verse 12. It says, *"For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they came he began to*

withdraw and hold himself aloof fearing the party of the circumcision."

Peter, the Super Jew, was there dining with his new brothers and sisters in Christ, the Gentiles. All was fine until some of his old buddies showed up. And they are not happy about his new found freedom. "How dare you, Peter, our leader!" "How dare you! Don't you know we don't do that in this neighborhood? Don't you know that in this neighborhood we don't fellowship? How could you Peter?"

And Peter was afraid of what his other brothers in Christ thought. He disregarded the truth of the Word of God told to him in Acts chapter 10. And it says that he withdrew himself.

Whenever you see the list of disciples in the New Testament, Peter's name is always first because he was the leader of the disciples. So when he withdrew, it says in verse 13, that the rest of the

"Jews joined him in his hypocrisy." With the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. Peter is the leader. When he fails as a leader to lead centered on the Bible, his congregation follows. The great tragedy of our day is that our churches have failed to deal with the issue of diversity. Because the church has not come to grips with this issue, the people of God have failed to be inclusionary when it comes to the oneness of the body.

Peter was afraid of what others would think. And he withdrew; and the rest of the Jews went with him.

Class barriers

But it wasn't just race that has caused problems for the church and culture. There were class barriers. Rich people were seen as more blessed and acceptable to God than poor people. Hence when Jesus says in Luke 18 that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye

of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples are stunned. *"If a rich man can't get into heaven then who can?"* Jesus crushed one of their core assumptions about who was acceptable to God.

In 2013 Madonna went back to Malawi to adopt another child. But it didn't leave the pop star in a good mood. Feeling that the government hadn't given her the courtesy her celebrity status deserves, the singer complained of not being able to meet the country's president and having to go through the normal security line at the airport. In other words, she was treated like a normal person and didn't like it. Malawi's official response to Madonna's grouchy attitude is worth reading.

"... Madonna has adopted two children from Malawi. According to the record, this gesture was humanitarian and of her own accord. It therefore, comes across as

strange and depressing that for a humanitarian act, prompted only by her, Madonna wants Malawi to be forever chained to the obligation of gratitude. Kindness, as far as its ordinary meaning is concerned, is free and anonymous. If it can't be free and silent, it is not kindness; it is something else. Blackmail is the closest it becomes."

Jesus was not known as one who dished out meals to prostitutes and other vulnerable sinners. He sat with them and ate with them. If AHUMC is going to do mission, it needs to look more like a shared meal than a soup kitchen, with none of us bound in gratitude except to God alone.

The belief that some people are more valuable than others runs deep in this world, and still does.

This, Jesus says, is wrong. When we condemn someone we are declaring that they have no value, no worth—that they

do not matter to us or God. We exclude them from belonging and we do it as a way of elevating ourselves.

At the beginning of the 18th century, England was in a moral quagmire and spiritually dead. The Church of England was dead as well. Worship was stiff and formal. Sermons were irrelevant to people's needs. Very few of the poor or working class felt welcomed in the Anglican Church.

But God raised up an Anglican priest by the name of John Wesley. Nobody was as stiff and formal and spiritually dead as him. But on May 24, 1738, Wesley came to know Christ as savior. The Church of England closed its doors to him and soon he was preaching to the coal miners, the poor, to prisoners and people in workhouses and debtors prisons. The revival resulted in much social reform including child labor laws, prison reform and the abolishment of slavery.

God has created one body with a lot of different looking faces. Unless we are willing to transcend, unless we are willing to rise above the efforts and intimidations of evil to allow history, background, culture, class and all the other human idiosyncrasies to divide the common call of Christ, then we will never see the impact of the church in reclaiming the culture.

Make no mistake about it—it won't come because of your political affiliation. For God doesn't ride the back of donkeys or elephants. The solutions to our problems won't be delivered on Air Force One. It has to come from the people of God.

Paul

Back to Galatians, chapter 2:14. When Paul finds out what Peter is doing, he calls him out in front of the church. He pulls no punches. “Peter- you hypocrite! The smell of bacon still lingers on your breath.”

Paul holds Peter accountable. But it goes far beyond the issue of kosher food. As Paul continues in his letter to the Galatians to spell out what faith in Christ means for this new community...the church, in chapter 3:26, he makes this proclamation: “*So in Christ you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

In Christ, gender, class, race no longer is what defines a person's worth.

One first century Christian author wrote, “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving-kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. Only look they say, ‘look how they love one another.’”

Why this matters

Everybody matters to God. God has never made a person that he didn't love. God made some people that I don't love and God has made some people I don't even like!

But God loves them. The most despicable person you can imagine is still loved by God. And because God cares, we must care. People are changed by love. Society is changed one life at a time. God has put specific people in your life that he expects you to love. You are the only Christian some people know. If we don't love them, who will?

People are watching the way we live. Your boss, your neighbors, your employees, your relatives, and your children are watching your words, and your actions, how you treat others. That's an awesome responsibility

That's what I want for AHUMC. I want us to be known as a community where all people are valuable and treated that way.

When new people walk in, they see that this is such a caring, loving, warm and winsome place that they want to be a part of it. They see something so compelling in our lives they want to be a part of it.

Jesus has given you and me an incredibly important role in his mission. He has given us the opportunity to impact not just our friends and family, but those people who are very different from us, with a message that can rewrite their life and eternal destination. What mission, what calling could be more fulfilling and challenging?

If we want to be an authentic church of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to give ourselves on behalf of our God, our neighbors, and one another. Authentic community is lived outwardly on behalf of others, not selfishly. That means that everything we do as people should be to honor God, to reach out in love of our neighbor and to support and care for one

another. No church can achieve favor with God or its neighbors by turning inward and caring only about people who look like everyone else.

We know that God's church can change the course of history. And I believe God will do that through our church if we will ask him. That's God's dream for the church.

Listen to what Pope Benedict wrote in *The Infancy Narrative*.

“God is love. But love can also be hated when it challenges us to transcend ourselves. It is not romantic ‘good feeling’. Redemption is not ‘wellness’ it not about basking in self-indulgence; on the contrary it is liberation from imprisonment in self-absorption. This liberation comes at a price: the anguish of the Cross.”

Conclusion

Two thousand years ago God created the church, and gave us the mission of sharing the gospel. It was God's idea to make the church an alternative community composed of as Paul writes, “*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

Do you yearn for that? Do you yearn for a diverse, vibrant, classless community where we can find our place and make it a place of joy and beauty by the way we live our lives? Where every man woman and child uses their gifts

A perfect place—probably not. But a community where we love and care for each other and help each other to become all that we can be in Christ.

A place where women, men, and children are becoming and making disciples. Where they are ministering with the gifts of the Spirit. Where they have an

opportunity to lead. Christ freed all of us to serve, to love, to care for, to strengthen, to support and nurture each other.

Jesus came to earth, born not in a palace, but in a manger full of hay; not into a royal family but to a simple working class family. And God did this to show that all people have value and dignity. The incarnation has changed our culture's thinking of who matters.

That's why he came.

It begins by you and I extending the love of God to everyone, and inviting everyone we know to be a part of the family of God.

Amen.