

Sermon – Luke 7 – The Sinful Woman Anoints Jesus – 26/6

In Dostoyevsky's great novel, 'The Brother's Karamazov', there is a holy man named Father Zosima. He is a renowned Elder of the local monastery, and such is this man's spiritual wisdom, that pilgrims will travel from great distances to ask his advice and seek his counsel. One such pilgrim who appears early in the novel is a wealthy woman who says that she is suffering a great crisis of faith and is at a loss for how to overcome it.

But her crisis of faith is not in God so much as it is in people.

'I love mankind', she says. 'But the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular. I dream of joining the Sisters of Mercy and tending to the sick and suffering. I imagine that I would bind their wounds and kiss their sores. Sometimes I feel such a passion of devotion that I'm certain I would willingly go to the cross and die for the world if it were required of me. And yet, I cannot sit for two days in a room with someone else, without finding their breathing to be too loud, or that they have a habit of grinding their teeth, or bothering me with their questions. In the space of a night and a day I am capable of coming to hate even the best of human beings.'

Can you relate to that feeling?

How quickly our idealised dreams of community stumble upon the tripwires of human imperfection. We want community. But we want community on our terms. Community in our language, in our places of safety and comfort, in accordance with our standards of etiquette and conduct and social mores. Community set to the music that we know and the terms of our tradition.

From the perspective of the men reclining with Jesus, the story of Luke 7 is the story of a pleasant evening of community spoiled. The woman is unseemly. She is disruptive. She shows no regard for the expectations upon her, or for the lowliness demanded of a woman in her position. Uninvited and unsanctioned, she brings her perfume to the house, she interrupts the dialogue of her betters, and weeping, she kisses and anoints the feet of Jesus.

But rather than rebuking her as the men expect, it is they that find themselves squarely faced with the ire and the judgement of the teacher. 'You did not give me water for my feet,' he says. 'You did not give me a kiss. You did put oil upon my head.'

It is not she that has failed in her duty. It is not she who was not heard the call to community and to transformation. It is not she who does not know her place. It is you, says Jesus to the men.

This scene is a glimpse of the order of the Kingdom of God. Here, the first are already made last and the last are made first. The hierarchy is upended, and the ladder of power and privilege is broken. In this holy moment of divine community, it is the learned, privileged men who are the outsiders, and this unclean, unseemly, and unrighteous woman who is the teacher.

And the woman's faith is beautiful. Like Dostoyevsky's fantasies of the Sisters of Mercy, it is an act of devotion worthy of a thousand sunlit stained glass windows. We understand why she kisses the feet of Jesus. We understand why she washes him with her hair and spills out her perfume at his feet.

But why does she weep?

It seems to me that she weeps because here, at the feet of Jesus, she has rediscovered her worth. Here her perfume is not an oil of attraction or desire, but an incense of holy love. Here she is far from the craving male gaze of her profession, in which she is not loved but lusted for, for her body and for her beauty. Here there is liberation from the captivating hierarchies of power and gender and cleanness. Here she is not under the gaze of disdain and superiority, but elevated, honoured, and blessed.

Yet, the Pharisee says, "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."

But there is grace in its glory. Jesus blesses her, not because he does not know who she is, but because he does know.

Friends, we've got to start seeing ourselves through the eyes of Jesus. Because let me tell you: if the holy and eternal God has made himself incarnate in the world, if Christ has left the right-hand of the Father to face the terror and the agony of Calvary, if God is doing a work of New Creation, if she is restoring the earth, if she is setting the stones of the New Jerusalem, if her spirit is poured out and upholding the church and calling her disciples and singing all things into restoration and reconciliation with Godself, if she is doing all these things then it can only be because we are a treasure of gold.

It can only be because the earth is precious.

It can only be because we possess an unsurpassable and inexpressible value.

It can only be because God will not allow God's image, imprinted upon us from Creation, to fade to dust and evil and sin.

The woman weeps because she sees herself through the eyes of Jesus, in this great arc of redemptive love that bends even for such small creatures as we are.

Friends we are precious. That is the testimony of Christ who blesses the sinful woman.

Love your neighbour as you love yourself, says Jesus. But love is not a finite resource that can be stored up in a reservoir. It cannot be hoarded. It cannot be carefully apportioned. It cannot be rationed or jealously guarded. Either it spills and it floods in all directions, or in all directions it recedes and dries up.

We cannot love our neighbour without first loving this soft creature that is our own body and mind and spirit. And once we see ourselves as Jesus sees this woman of great faith, then we cannot despise ourselves. We cannot hate our bodies. We cannot disdain our skin

colour, or our gender, or who we love, or the pattern of our lives in all their unfulfilled ambitions and petty regrets.

Of course, that is never to say that we are perfect as we are. God calls us to change, and we must not diminish the urgency and the insistence of that call. In Jesus' parable we are the debtor that owes the greater debt. But seeing ourselves through the eyes of Christ is the first step on that road of transformation. For Jesus does not say of the woman, 'her sins are forgiven *because* of her great love.' She is not shown mercy by the goodness of her character. He says, 'she has already been forgiven, as her great love has shown.' It is the grace already given that drives her on to love and faithfulness.

'The more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular,' says Dostoevsky's troubled woman.

Sometimes the comforts of religion threaten to drive us from love in the particular. To be hostile to our bodies, to wrap ourselves in the reassuring clothes of theological self-righteousness and devilish certainties. To seek out only that community that resembles what we already are, rather than driving us into new figures of Kingdom life.

May God grant us the faithfulness of this 'sinful woman', that the river of love might run out from us in every direction, bounding indiscriminately in unseemly waves of joy. That we may see our unsurpassable value through the eyes of Jesus, and the preciousness of our neighbour in all their God-given diversity. That grace might drive us on to newness of love and faithfulness.

And may those who step among us, like the woman of great faith, weep with relief at the remembrance of what they are worth.

Amen.