

THE "REAL" JESUS IDENTIFIED WITH...
LUKE 7:31-50
(FOURTH SERMON IN SERIES)

MARCH 2, 1986

Our theme this Lenten season is "LOOKING TO JESUS", from Hebrews 12:2, "Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." In this sermon series, we are also looking for Jesus, trying to see behind the Jesus of the church's theology to the "real" Jesus. In the sermons preached so far, I've tried to make the point that Jesus aligned himself with John the Baptist by being baptized by him and by prophesying (which means "warning") that an unprecedented catastrophe was bound to come unless the people repented and received the kingdom of God. The people rejected Jesus and the catastrophe came in 70 A.D. when Titus destroyed the beloved temple. The mass suicide at Masada and the eventual devastation of Jerusalem and the banishing of the Jews from Jerusalem fulfilled Jesus' prophecy.

John the Baptist saw the catastrophe as the judgment of God. Jesus saw the catastrophe as an opportunity for God's salvation, an opportunity for God to establish the kingdom. John called everyone to a baptism of repentance. Jesus did not baptize, but preached (Matthew 4:17), "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." What did he mean? His actions as well as his words reveal a great deal to us about the "real" Jesus, his message and his methodology. In this sermon today we are looking at the company Jesus kept. You can learn a great deal about people by looking at their friends, their crowd. And we can learn much about Jesus by using the same method. With whom did Jesus identify? With whom did Jesus fellowship? Who were his friends?

I previously described some of the groups and movements of the day--Pharisees, Zealots, Sadducees, Essenes--but there was one more group. This group was not organized. This group was not one that people joined by choice; in fact, they spent their energy trying to get out of the group, rather than join it! Except for Jesus! Jesus associated with this group and caused a scandal. We here in the United States, especially here in California, find it difficult really to get a sense of the scandal Jesus caused. But, can you picture a white aristocrat in the south before the Civil War, inviting a slave to a formal dinner? Or, can you see yourself inviting someone with AIDS, the outcast "lepers" of our day, to dinner?

Those are the kind of people with whom Jesus identified. He loved them. He was moved with compassion. In Jesus' day, this class of people was large. In fact, the majority of the population were in this group. The middle class and the upper class were relatively small. Jesus was born and reared in the middle class and caused quite a scandal by associating with the lower class. You heard in the gospel lesson this morning how the shocked citizens of that day said about Jesus (Luke 7:34), "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" This verse and similar verses show us that the "real" Jesus enjoyed parties and people enjoyed him. But, horror of horrors, he ate with tax collectors and sinners!

Who were these people? Albert Nolan in Jesus Before Christianity writes:

The people to whom Jesus turned his attention are referred to in the gospels by a variety of terms: the poor, the

blind, the lame, the crippled, the lepers, the hungry, the miserable (those who weep), sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, demoniacs (those possessed by unclean spirits), the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, all who labor and are overburdened, the rabble who know nothing of the law, the crowds, the little ones, the least, the last and the babes or the lost sheep of the house of Israel...Jesus generally refers to them as the poor or the little ones.

They were the beggars, for there were no social agencies to help. They were sick, disabled, widows, orphans, blind, deaf, lame, cripples and lepers. The sinners were the social outcasts. They were those who deviated from the law. Because of their economic condition, they were unable to keep the law. The Pharisees viewed them as being incapable of virtue or piety. There was no way out for the sinners. They were trapped by the social system, much like those of our day who are trapped in the welfare system, caught in a vicious cycle which holds them captive.

Jesus shocked the righteous people of his day by freely associating with the poor, with the people who "don't count." Jesus was moved to tears and set about the task of liberating the poor. He loved them, forgave them, healed them, partied with them. He preached and taught that the kingdom of God is for them, that in the kingdom of God they are important people, loved by God, noticed, wanted, needed. Some of the most beautiful and cherished words in the Bible were spoken by Jesus to the outcasts: (Matthew 5:3-6)

Blessed (happy) are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed (happy) are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Jesus treated them with dignity and gave them hope, not only with his words but by his actions. As I read the gospels, the "real" Jesus demonstrated the kingdom of God by partying! That image doesn't quite fit the traditional image the church has had of Jesus, does it? But Jesus loved parties. He hosted feasts, like the Last Supper. Isn't it interesting that Jesus wanted to be remembered in the context of a party! The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a reenactment of a party.

Joy was an important ingredient in Jesus' ministry. Jesus had the ability to make people feel comfortable and happy. The meals that he ate with the sinners were celebrations. Can we possibly imagine the impact these parties had on the outcasts? Nolan writes, (pg. 39) "By accepting them as friends and equals, Jesus had taken away their shame, humiliation and guilt. By showing them that they mattered to him as people he gave them a sense of dignity and released them from their captivity." Jesus did not just tell them they were important to God. Jesus did not just tell them they were forgiven. Jesus partied--celebrated--with them.

Jesus identified with the poor and disassociated himself from the rich and the righteous. He reserved extremely harsh words for the Pharisees and the Sadducees, calling them "You brood of vipers!" He told them their righteousness was like filthy rags. He said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, which is the narrow entrance next to the city

gate, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus made it very clear that one's admission to the kingdom of God is dependent upon one's treatment of the poor. In Matthew 25 he said that those who will inherit the kingdom are those who feed him when he is hungry, clothe him when he is naked, etc., because "as you do it to one of the least of these, you do it to me." The "least of these" is one of his favorite terms for the poor.

Nevertheless, even though Jesus dealt harshly with those who have means and do not share, who judge others when they can't keep the law, who oppress others with their power, Jesus did not exclude them. The rich and the righteous were also invited. They were invited into the kingdom. They were invited to the feasts. Evidently they weren't too comfortable at Jesus' parties because they had to associate with sinners. In our lesson today, Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee who became quite disturbed because "one of those women..a woman of the city" dared to come into his house to wash and anoint Jesus' feet. Much to the host's displeasure, Jesus defended the woman.

As we seek to understand the "real" Jesus and as we seek to be his people, there are two critically important points that I want to underline. First, the fact that Jesus identified with the outcasts is a strong message for his church today. The church is at its best when it, too, is identified with the exploited, the powerless, the people who don't count in the eyes of the world. The church is at its best when it welcomes refugees, provides sanctuary for the mistreated, opens its arms to all people (especially people that society considers unfit), feeds the hungry and challenges the systems that keep people in poverty. When the church forgets its clientele and only serves the comfortable and insensitive rich, Jesus is angered as he was angered by the Pharisees of his day.

Secondly, Jesus identifies with the people who admit their needs, who realize their need of the mercy and grace of God. Jesus welcomes and befriends you when you cannot cope, when you admit that you cannot make it on your own strength, when you are burdened and are heavy laden, when the pressures get heavy. When you come to Communion today, come as the church seeking to be faithful to Christ's mission to serve the poor. When you come to Communion today, come as an individual person admitting your need, bowing your proud head, honestly facing your fears and shortcomings.

I often find myself at the end of my resources. One of the ways I admit my need of God's mercy and express my dependence on God is to sing. I'd like to sing this part of the sermon with a song I've sung for many years. I sing it in public. I sing it while driving the car. I sing it at home. I sing it in my sleep. This is my prayer.

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light,
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

When my way grows drear, Precious Lord, linger near;
When my life is almost gone.
Hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall,
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

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