

Sermon for Zion, November 3, 2019 – Reformation Sunday

Hymns: 315 - A Mighty Fortress; 27 – As the Deer; 64 – Be Still and Know;
350 – to God be the Glory; 670 – Amazing Grace

Scripture: Luke 7:1-10; 36-50

Sermon Title: Faith in Unlikely Faces

Luke 7:1-10; 36-50

When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

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

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."

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

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

"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.

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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

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

In order for us to appreciate just what’s going on in these two lengthy readings, I’m going to have to take you back to last week’s passage from Luke 6. It went like this (Luke 6:27-36):

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you...

“Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Radical stuff, and perhaps the words for which Jesus is most famous. But to demonstrate how those words are not just pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking, but actual principles of Kingdom conduct, in the very next chapter – the one we’re looking at today – Jesus puts his words into action. And he does so in the most radical way.

Note first of all his audience; the passage we just read from last week started, *“to you who are listening I say.”* And today’s passage starts the same way: *“When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum.”* Same audience: the “listeners.” Luke is tying the passages together. One follows the other. This isn’t a random sequence. We – the “listeners” – are being told to pay attention. Jesus has finished speaking. Now he’s going to put these words into action.

And the instigator of that action is the most unlikely of characters: the Roman Centurion in charge of the Capernaum garrison. The very symbol of Roman oppression and authority. The iron boot of ruthless power.

Ten second history lesson: the Romans were in charge. They had conquered the nation a generation before, and had installed a puppet king, Herod, who had the dual purpose of squashing rebellion and squeezing every last dollar, drachma, shekel and dime out of the land and the people. Life under the Romans was unbelievably harsh, and rebellion was forever bubbling under the surface, with brutal Roman reprisals taking countless lives, randomly if need be. Galileans were particularly prone to insurrection. Capernaum, a border town, had its own Roman garrison to supervise tax and customs duties, and to ensure that any Galilean with big ideas would soon feel the edge of a Roman sword. Pontius Pilate, apparently just to make a point, had slaughtered a group of Galileans while they were worshipping at the Temple, right around this time. Those were the Romans. And our first story deals with just such a Roman.

Luke presents him as a “good Roman Centurion,” which is a bit like saying, “good Nazi officer.” I’m sure there were good Nazi officers, but they were nevertheless representatives and enforcers of a truly evil rule. Maybe that’s too out-of-date an illustration. How about, “good ISIS mullah?” Happily, I can think of no Canadian example. But you get the idea.

This particular Centurion chose to keep the local peace with the carrot rather than the stick, using a portion of the tax dollars to build the local synagogue, and expressed affection, rather than resentment, for the land of his posting. And so when he has need of Jesus, due to a highly valued servant who was dying, he has some of the local synagogue leaders make the appeal on his behalf. I’ll let Luke recap what happens next:

Jesus was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

The Centurion knew that it would have been problematic for Jesus to actually enter a Pagan household, which Jews were forbidden to do – he relieves Jesus of that responsibility. But he also saves himself the indignity of being directly refused, should Jesus have chosen not to come. “When I say the word, things get done,” he says. “I presume you can do the same.”

And Jesus, astonished at this Roman's recognition of Jesus' authority, does. The servant is healed. And Jesus caps it all off with, *"I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."* A statement which would have made many a local heart grow bitter and cold. Because aren't we supposed to hate the Romans?

But this is Jesus, who just said to those who were listening, *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them."* Read that passage again with occupying Roman soldiers in mind, and you've got a pretty good description of their typical conduct – enemies who hate you, curse you, mistreat you, slap your face, take the shirt right off your back. We're supposed to love them? How? "Watch me," says Jesus. "No one is beyond God's mercy and love."

We're not told if this Centurion (or his servant) became a follower. Believer, yes; follower, we don't know. But there are at least two other Centurions in the New Testament who do. One at the foot of the cross; another named Cornelius, who Peter converts. But that's a story – a sermon - for another day. Because we have another story to tell.

And for that, we again need another portion of last week's passage. Listen (6:37-38):

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

A Pharisee has invited Jesus to dinner, trying to figure him out. We get the idea from the Gospels that the Pharisees are universally opposed to Jesus, but a closer reading shows that some of his first followers were from that very group – Nicodemus, for one. The Pharisees were very particular, and carefully observant of the smallest observation of religious law – and since there were 613 religious laws to follow, that's pretty observant indeed. They were also harshly critical of any who transgressed these laws, sometimes critical to the point of having transgressors killed. Many Pharisees, we are told, decided that very fate for Jesus, who was forever healing people on the Sabbath (which was not permitted), eating with tax collectors and their ilk (which was not permitted), engaging in conversation with Samaritans and pagans (which was not permitted), and so on.

This particular Pharisee, Simon, wants to hear from Jesus directly, so he has him over for dinner. But not as an honoured guest; more as an object of curiosity. Maybe, as in other instances in the Gospels, to trap Jesus somehow. Why do we say not an honoured guest? Because we are told that Simon provides none of the courtesies properly due a guest – water for dirty, tired feet; a kiss of greeting; some refreshing oil for a parched face.

The guests are reclined around the table, in the manner of the day. Large houses back then were not only private homes but important public statements, and while only the guests reclined, observers and hangers-on could come and go. But one such observer took things a bit too far. I'll let Luke tell it:

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. 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.

Let that sink in for a moment. Picture it, if you dare. It is a shockingly intimate scene. In a society which had very, very strict rules about what constituted appropriate conduct, particularly between the sexes, this was way, way, way out of bounds. In our society, where it seems anything goes, you'd nevertheless be shocked to witness such behaviour at a church pot luck (there's one this Saturday! Come and see!). Only a husband was to see a wife's hair. It is so in Orthodox Jewish circles even today. This woman not only lets her hair down, she wipes Jesus' feet with her hair, kisses his feet, pours perfume on them. Intimacy, you see, is the only currency she knows, and in her recognition of her great need, it is in this act of great intimacy that she expresses her remorse, her gratitude, her love.

It is too personal, too intimate a moment for us to watch. So we turn instead to the shocked, astonished, disbelieving face of Simon the Pharisee. His face betrays his thoughts: *"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."* What kind of man would let this kind of woman do such a thing? Surely not a man of God! Simon has judged the woman, and found her wanting. He has condemned her as unworthy of the presence of Jesus.

Of Jesus, who said, *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."* Do not judge someone as unworthy of the grace and mercy of God. Do not condemn someone as beyond hope, beyond forgiveness, beyond salvation.

He tells Simon a story, to help him understand:

“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.

He then pointed out the difference between someone who knows they need mercy, forgiveness, grace – between people like Simon, who believe themselves righteous and worthy of God’s hearty favour - and the woman, who recognises her own deep need:

“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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

You who are listening: Do not judge someone as unworthy of the grace and mercy of God. Do not condemn someone as beyond hope, beyond forgiveness, beyond salvation. Love them. Pray for them. Recognise them as a child of God – flawed, faltering, sinful – but loved by God, whose hand of mercy is extended; by God, whose love was not only for the righteous, but for the sinner. For all. For the whole world. Centurions and Pharisees and fallen women. For all who believe.

Maybe you are Simon, confident of your righteous life – you are so much better than the other guy. Is your high opinion of yourself blinding you to your need? Do you love God but little? Will you accept his invitation to love him more?

Maybe you are the Centurion, recognising Jesus’ power, but reluctant to approach. Do not be afraid; his love for you is certain, and your welcome assured.

Maybe you are the one whose life is broken, whose heart is filled with regret, afraid of the condemnation of others. To you Jesus says, *“Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”*

To you who are listening, I say: “Thanks be to God.” Amen.