

“PORTRAITS OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE (#2):
THE PEOPLE JESUS LOVED”

(Luke 7:36-39, 48-50)

© 2011 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-20-11 AM]

[PREPARATION BEFORE SUNDAY: Costume needed to preach in]

--I--

1. **[BOTH Services]** Have someone else read text (9:30am MSG; 11am NRSV) from Luke 7:36-39, 48-50. I'm in congregation, & take time moving to front after scripture prayer.
2. So... to what extent do you judge others on their outward appearance... what they wear, their age, the color of their skin, where they have their tattoos or facial jewelry?

A--It's only human to do so. ¹ The problem is when we start believing a persons' entire identity can be reduced to the superficiality of those things.

1--We assume certain things about their character and integrity, their morality and ethics, their political views, sexual orientation, or even the degree of their spiritual faith... all solely from their outward appearance.

2--And we then begin to neatly stereotype and categorize them: ...they're rich, poor, middle class; ...black, white, Mexican, Korean; ...gay, straight; ...redneck, Yankee, a floozy; ...a flaming liberal, a narrow-minded conservative. ²

B--And more times than not, our stereotypes and assumptions about others are tragically mistaken.

C--And even when they're not, we tend to use those assumptions as a way of associating with people who are *like* us (who make us feel comfortable), and of also using them to *look down* on those who are *different* from us (who make us feel *uncomfortable*).

3. Well, today as we continue our series Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, our scripture invites us to consider *The People that Jesus Loved*, and how his example can help us overcome our human tendency to judge others based on outward appearances alone.

-II-

4. Let's begin by acknowledging that humans throughout history have struggled with this tendency to stereotype and categorize, and that the Palestine of Jesus' day was no different.

A--Consider, for example, that people of Jesus' time were lumped into the various **religious categories of Judaism**. There were...

1--...The *Sadducees* ³, the *Pharisees* ⁴, the *Essenes* ⁵, and the *Zealots* ⁶, each a separate group which distrusted the others and thought of theirs as "true" Judaism.

2--There was the *broad majority* of Jews in first-century Palestine who didn't follow *any* of these groups, but merely tried to be good Jews and decent human beings.

3--And there was what we would today call *the non-religious and nominally religious people* – including the “*sinners*” (like the woman in today's story), most of whom were *never* included as part of the ongoing religious life of Judaism.

B--But then, there were also various **ethnic categories** in Jesus' day. Remember that Israel was a tiny country divided into three basic geographic regions:

1--*Galilee* in the north (where Jesus grew up) and *Jerusalem and Judea* in the south.

(a) The people down south thought people from Galilee were “*country hicks*” (remember Peter's accent)⁷, and the Galileans thought of those in the south as snobs who thought too much of themselves.

(b) What's more is that Galilee also contained many *Gentiles* – people like Greeks, and the Roman occupying forces, who were considered heathen and “unclean” simply because they weren't Jewish.

2--And sandwiched in between Galilee and Judea was the region known as *Samaria*, which contained people of mixed descent. Intermarriages produced a population which was half-Jewish, half-Gentile – people who accepted fully into *neither* Jewish nor Gentile culture.

C--Finally, there were also **socio-economic categories**, like the rich and the poor that Jesus talked so much about in the gospels,⁸ and the educated and uneducated classes of society.

5. My point is that the culture of Palestine in Jesus' day was as much of a mess as our culture is today when it comes to stereotyping & categorizing people based on outward assumptions.

–III–

6. But Luke's gospel also makes it clear that Jesus was the one person who ever lived who didn't look at categories – he didn't look at people the way you and I tend to look at them.

A--Instead, he looked beyond the categories and stereotypes and saw people and their needs.⁹

Consider just some of the people with whom Jesus related and ministered as told by the gospels:

1--The *disabled*¹⁰, whose diseases were considered a product of their sin.

2--*Lepers*¹¹ and *Samaritans*¹², who were both shunned and despised by others.

3--*Women*¹³, who “respectable” Jewish men weren't to even fellowship with.

4--And don't forget the *mentally ill*, *demon possessed*, and *homeless*?¹⁴

5--Plus, he ministered to the hated *Gentiles and Roman Soldiers*¹⁵, to the *Poor*¹⁶, and even to the *Rich and Wealthy*.¹⁷

B--And all of these are examples of how Jesus loved people *beyond* the accepted religious, ethnic and social categories and boundaries of his day.¹⁸

7. Today's story from Luke 7 exemplifies this in many ways.

A–Not only does it tell us that Jesus was willing to accept an invitation to dine & fellowship at the home a despised Pharisee (Simon), but that he also allowed this woman (the town prostitute) to come into his presence, anoint his feet with costly oil, and then use her hair to dry them.

B–Can you imagine what Simon and the other Pharisees must have been thinking?
*“What is this crying prostitute doing here? How does she know Jesus? What’s gone on between the two of them that we don’t know about? Doesn’t Jesus know that by allowing this unclean sinner to even touch him, he’s now unclean, too?”*¹⁹

C–You see, all that Simon and the other Pharisees could see about this woman was what she *was* and what she’d *done*.

1–They didn’t see a broken, lonely woman – broken and lonely because in her entire life, no one had ever really shown her true love or respect.

2–Up to now, she’d been a non-person – an object of male sexual fantasy, and not a real human being.

3–But when she met Jesus, she encountered for the first time the kind of unconditional love that only God can give.

D–You see, Jesus didn’t see *what* she was or what she’d *done* – he saw *who* she was to God and who she *could become* in Him.

8. And that’s what Jesus does for *us* today, as well.

A–When he looks at you and me, he doesn’t see all our mistakes, or all the ways we’ve blown it – he doesn’t see all the names or labels that other people try to categorize us by.

B–No. He sees and loves us for who we *are* (children of our heavenly Father) and for who we *can become* when we truly follow Him.

–IV–

9. And this story also teaches us **something about the kind of people that we as Christians are to be**, as well.

A–For example, I believe it teaches that God’s church should be a place where we look *beyond* the human categories, stereotypes, and labels that the rest of the world uses – a place where people are seen and loved the way Jesus does.

1–It should be a living embodiment of the Kingdom of God on earth – an incarnation of Jesus in our world, breaking down social, racial, ethnic & religious barriers.²⁰

2–God’s Church should be the one place where people walk in and say, “*Wow! That’s different! They don’t look at me the way the rest of the world looks at me. They love me for me, rather than for who they want me to be!*”²¹

B–Now you & I know, of course, that we’re *not* there yet, either as individuals or as a church.

1–More often than we’d like to admit, people visit a church (our church included), and because of their skin color, or the way they dress, or the ring in their nose, or the part of town they live in, we shun them.

2–Not usually on purpose. But we do it nevertheless by greeting and huddling around only those people that we know, and who’re like us.

10. **So how do we become more like Jesus, then? – how do we overcome this human tendency to categorize and stereotype others?**

A–Well, first we need to *become aware* of the fact that we do it (unintentionally and otherwise), and *ask God’s forgiveness* for it.

B–And then, we need to intentionally seek out the image of God in others (especially those who aren’t like us) – to see the good and the God in them (regardless of what they appear to be on the *outside*).

C–And when we do that, we’ll find God empowering us to be the kind of people that He’d have us be – to see “*The People That Jesus Loved*” and to love them as he did.

11. [PRAYER: “*Lord Jesus, we give you thanks and praise for your mercy towards a prostitute who came to you – someone who others only saw what she was, and yet you saw who she was and who she could become. We ask for your forgiveness for any ways that we, like the Pharisees, may not have extended your welcome to all of your people. Forgive us for our tendency to still see people for what they are and not who they are. Lord, help this to be a congregation that reaches out with your love to every person in our community and world, regardless of how different they might seem. In the process, we ask that you transform our own hearts and lives that we might see as you see, and love as you love. In your holy name we pray, Amen.*”]

ENDNOTES:

1. *All* humans (consciously or not) make these kinds of assumptions, categorizations, and value judgements about others. It is a part of our human nature to do so, and the Bible teaches that it’s been this way from the very beginning. Consider the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4: Cain killed Abel because he (a farmer) was jealous of his brother (a rancher). In fact, the Old Testament is filled with stories of one people group

oppressing another people group, or trying to separate themselves from another people group, so that by the end of the Old Testament there's a desperate need for someone to come and straighten the whole thing out. That someone, of course, was Jesus. He came to teach us what God really intended for us as human beings—how we are to relate to and understand one another as fellow children of God.

2. In other words, we begin to make value judgments about them, about what they stand for, and even about *who* they are as people. This is true even if we sense that they're somehow in some category that's "higher" than us (maybe more educated or wealthier, etc.). In these cases, we often find ways to criticize them so that (at least in our eyes) they come back down to *our* level.

And at our worst, these value judgments manifest themselves in terrible ways, as they have throughout history, with horrors like slavery and the Holocaust. These are examples where for thousands of years people bought and sold other human beings, believing that somehow because of THEIR religious, ethnic, or economic status they had the "right" to own another human being. Or perhaps because one was a male and one was a female they had a "right" to control those who were in a different category from themselves. Or maybe there was a master-race designated by God to be in charge, and some of the lesser races were so far below that they needed to be eliminated.

3. The small but rich aristocracy of Israel who controlled the Jerusalem Temple, the High Priesthood, & the ruling religious body (the Sanhedrin).

4. The dominate branch of Judaism in that day who thought the Sadducees were stuck-up snobs, but were still legalistic in many ways themselves.

5. Though not mentioned directly in the New Testament, the Essenes were nevertheless highly influenced it's development. They were the group that formed the Qumran community, out of which the famous "Dead Sea Scrolls" were developed. They felt that both the Sadducees and Pharisees had Judaism wrong, and that *their* way of withdrawing from society was the only way to be "pure." They rejected the rituals of the Temple and the synagogue and withdrew to form their own monastic communities.

6. They wanted to overthrow the Roman government by force, and encouraged open rebellion and acts of terrorism and violence to this end. Barabbas, the man freed by Pilate at the urging of the Passover crowd in Luke 23:18-19, was a Zealot, and some scholars have speculated that Judas Iscariot (the one who betrayed Jesus) was a Zealot, as well.

7. They were said to even talk with an accent (remember what was said about Peter's accent in Luke 22:59).

8. Even among the rich, there were the rich who came by their riches honestly, and then there were the dishonest rich like the "tax collectors." And among the poor there was lower class of poor and an ordinary class of poor.

9. Read Jesus' understanding of his own calling from God in Luke 4:18-19 and Luke 17:21.

10. For example, Luke 5:17-26 and 13:10-17. In Jesus' day, people thought that if a person was paralyzed or blind, it was because either they or their parents had sinned.

11. In Jesus' day, lepers had to cry out "*Unclean!*" as they walked around in public so that no one would come near them. Leprosy was considered contagious, and lepers were not allowed to live or associate with the rest of society. They were shunned and despised. And yet, Luke 5:12-14 and 17:11-19 tells us stories

of Jesus not only associating with lepers, but actually touching and healing them.

12. Read Luke 10:25-37 and 17:16. Consider that Jesus walked through Samaria to do ministry, not around it as a “good Jew” should have done. What’s more is that in Luke 10 we read Jesus telling a story about a man who’d fallen on the road. He’d been robbed, beaten and left for dead. Well, remember that in that story there were 2 really religious Jews who passed by on the other side instead of helping the man. And what made the Jewish Pharisees and Sadducees so irritated at him was the fact that the hero of his story was a hated Samaritan.

13. Consider Luke 8:1-3 (where Jesus accepts women as his followers) and Luke 10:38-42 (where Jesus dared to be received into a home owned by a woman). In a day and time when “good, upright, respectable” Jewish men didn’t fellowship with women, eat at the table with them, or even allow them in the same room with the men, Jesus ministered to women. In a time when women were certainly not treated as equals with men, by his ministry with them, he elevated them to his own status.

14. Consider Luke 8:26-39 and 9:37-43.

15. Read Luke 7:1-10, where Jesus heals a Roman centurion’s slave.

16. Read 16:19-31, Jesus’ story of the Lazarus and the rich man in heaven.

17. Read Luke 19:1-10, the story of Jesus associating with and dining in the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector. In Verse 10 of that passage, Jesus explains his mission in relationship to even this hated tax collector by saying that “*the Son of Man has come to seek out and to save the lost.*”

18. To this list one could also add the sexually-broken and those caught in addictive lifestyles of sin (Read Luke 7:36-50, and, from another gospel, John 8:3-11).

19. Verse 39 give a hint of what they might be thinking.

20. Read Galatians 3:28-29.

21. Somewhere along the way, when others look at us as Christians, they need to see that there’s something different about us in how we look at other people and how we respond to other people, especially people who are different than us.