

Sermon - table-fellowship for sinners

Based on: Luke 15.1–10

The message is in the setting

- Today's Gospel reading provides a couple of memorable and heart-warming stories - metaphors of lost people being found and restored to the community, which then celebrates.
- However, it is the context in which Jesus tells these stories that provides the message that is most relevant for our church community today.
- One of the key aspects is found in the first sentence:

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. (Luke 15.1)
- The listening that they were doing was not merely hearing the words of Jesus, but
 - actively engaging with them,
 - thinking and reflecting on them,
 - perhaps asking and responding vocally,
 - considering the meaning of what Jesus was saying, and
 - allowing all of that to change their understanding of God's relationship with them, and
 - their perception of how they might engage more meaningfully with their own lives and with the world.

Pay attention to how you listen

- Now it might seem that I've assumed a huge amount from the mere phrase *to listen to Jesus*, so before we continue, let's look at other moments - just in Luke's gospel account - where the word *listen* might involve all that I've just described.
- In Jesus' sermon on the plain, when he preaches the Lucan version of the Beatitudes, Jesus continues by saying: *'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies ...'* (Luke 6.27)
- At the end of telling his parable of the sower, Jesus said, *'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'* (Luke 8.8)
- And after explaining that parable and making further comments, Jesus continued, *'For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. [So] pay attention to how you listen ...'* (Luke 8.17-18)
- During the event when Jesus was transfigured in glory, *from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'* (Luke 9.35)
- When Jesus visited his friend Martha we are told *She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.* (Luke 10.39)
- It is directly due to this intentional, active listening to Jesus and his teachings that his disciples learnt how to listen to and discern God's Spirit that enabled the church to be established and to grow.
- It is this same attentive, responsive listening that Jesus calls us to do today, and that our heavenly Father likewise endorses that we attend to.

Tax-collectors and sinners

- So with that in mind, let us return to the gospel reading.
- In the chapters that immediately precede this Jesus confronts his fellow Pharisees several times with a deeper understanding of God's law of love, and then speaks to those who want to follow him, concluding with a repetition of his previous words: *Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'* (Luke 14.35)
- The very next sentence is where today's passage starts:

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near [- to do exactly that -] to listen to Jesus. (Luke 15.1)

Sermon - table-fellowship for sinners

- After this repeated instruction to listen who are the ones that are paying close attention to what Jesus is saying? The tax-collectors and sinners!
- Not the people who are already in relationship with God - or who think that they are - but the people who think that they are *not* in relationship with God, the tax-collectors and sinners.
- It is helpful to understand who was being described in this way.
- The tax-collectors then are not like those who work for the Australian Tax Office now!
- The tax-collectors of Jesus' time were Jews who collaborated with the Roman occupying force - who collected state taxes from their fellow Jews to hand over to the Roman oppressors.
- And each time they came into direct contact with the Gentile Romans, they would become ritually unclean, and thus assumed to be unworthy to stand in God's presence in worship.
- And yet they knew their need to be able to stand before God, and eagerly listened to Jesus' teaching about love, and compassion, and mercy, and forgiveness.
- The other people who were labeled as sinners were anyone else who had fallen foul of the religious regulations, and were seen as unworthy, and ostracised by many of the religious teachers and leaders.
- For them it would have been hugely significant to have a religious teacher like Jesus accept them, and engage with them, and treat them with respect and dignity.
- Jesus' attitude alone would have been healing and restorative in itself.

Teaching the prejudiced

- Once again Jesus' attitude and actions are condemned by those who could be learning from him:
the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' (Luke 15.2)
- So Jesus tells them the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.
- And he does so in a way that directly confronts and challenges them.
- He invites them to imagine themselves firstly to be a shepherd, and secondly to be a woman.
- The Jews considered occupations like shepherding and leather tanning to be dishonourable - and this was in spite of being able to revere God as a shepherd in Psalm 23, and in spite of the community depending upon shepherds and tanners.
- And one of the Jewish men's daily prayers was "Thank you, Lord of the universe, that you did not make me a woman."
- Such was their prejudice against women and people doing supposedly dishonourable work.
- So Jesus confronts the scribes and Pharisees by suggesting that they join with him, and reconsider their prejudice against the very people who needed, and wanted, to connect with God.
- Because there, sitting with Jesus, were the people who showed they had repented.
- Of course they hadn't repented from being tax-collectors, and shepherds (and women!) - Jesus made it clear that that attitude was unnecessary.
- Rather, their repentance involved turning - turning from listening to their own words to listening to God's word.
- Referring to the two parables, these so-called sinners were represented by the lost sheep that was sought out, and by the lost coin that was searched for and found.
- And Jesus tells the Pharisees, and perhaps the 'sinners' too, and certainly the disciples, that heaven rejoices when this happens - that heaven was rejoicing right there and then.
- Whenever anyone is able to reconnect with God, or able to connect more deeply with God, heaven rejoices.
- Anyone who listens to the words of Jesus is already making that deeper connection.
- Not listening in the dismissive way of his detractors, but actively engaging with and responding to the meaning of his words.

Sermon - table-fellowship for sinners

Imagining our church in this story

- Now one of the commentaries I have uses this story of Jesus sitting at table with sinners, and reaching out to those prejudiced against them, to reflect on how this image might be an inspiration for the contemporary church.
- So I'm going to quote what the late Roger Van Harn - a pastor from Michigan USA - has so evocatively described. Pastor Van Harn wrote:

Picture Jesus and his table guests in the middle of [our] church ... What would [our] church be like if it were shaped by Jesus' table fellowship with sinners?

First, it would be a safe place for people to come near to listen. What factors in [our] church seem threatening to persons who would otherwise come to listen? What barriers to listening are removable? How can we make the church a fellowship in which persons dare to come to listen? How can the church be a place where people feel free to wonder, to ask, and to listen?

Second, [our] church would be a place where people are nurtured for [Christ's] seek-and-save mission in the world. The table talk would include encouragement to take the love and message of Jesus into the world. For people who are too afraid or angry to come to the table to listen, those who are [here] would be encouraged to bring the table fellowship to them. The table is not walled off from the world; the table is a sign of God's mission in and for the world. The church is a safe place for people to listen - and the headquarters for bringing what is heard [here] to those who cannot yet come.

Third, [our] church would be a party house where celebrations happen. The rejoicing of the angels can be heard and sung in the songs. The church is a fellowship that reaches forward to the new heaven and the new earth and brings its joyful songs into the present. Jesus heard the songs of the angels at his table of fellowship with sinners. The church that is shaped by that table can do no less ...

[Can we] envision our church:

- *as a safe place for people [- both for ourselves and for others -] to come near and listen,*
- *as a headquarters for our [participation with Jesus'] search-and-save mission in the world, and*
- *as a party house where seeking sinners echo the songs of the new heaven and earth ... ?¹*

Concluding with a song

- Today the sermon concludes with a hymn written by Marty Haugen.
- Marty Haugen is composer-in-residence at Mayflower Community Congregational Church in Minneapolis USA, and has composed liturgical music and many hymns.

¹ p413, The Lectionary Commentary: vol 3 The Gospels, Roger E Van Harn (2001, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing co.)

Sermon - table-fellowship for sinners

Let us build a house, by Marty Haugen (b.1952) © GIA Publications Inc., 1994, CCL No 632290

1. Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell
how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
all are welcome,
all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.
2. Let us build a house where prophets speak,
and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek
to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
and as symbol of God's grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:
all are welcome,
all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.
3. Let us build a house where love is found
in water, wine and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground,
where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
is revealed in time and space;
as we share in Christ the feast that frees us:
all are welcome,
all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.
4. Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:
all are welcome,
all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.
5. Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed
as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:
all are welcome,
all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.