

“Who Was Jesus? He Loved the Unlovable.”

Once upon a time there was a pastor who played a trick on his congregation. The people showed up one Sunday and the Associate Pastor was preaching. As far as the people knew, the senior pastor was on vacation, let's say, snow skiing in Colorado. But instead that senior pastor really didn't go to Colorado, instead he came to his own church that Sunday, except in disguise. He had several days' growth of beard, he wore ratty clothes and a dingy ball cap, he had on a wig of matted brown hair, and he walked into church alone, and nobody recognized him.

He arrived early before each of, say, three worship services that Sunday morning. You see, the people of his growing, vibrant church had always said that they were one of the friendliest congregations around, one of the most welcoming and warmest churches ever, he wanted to see if it was true. He didn't act particularly outgoing, but he did stand in very conspicuous places. He wanted to see if somebody who looked a little poor, and little lost, and alone would be warmly welcomed by the people he'd been preaching to for, say, 10 years. He didn't want to embarrass his congregation, he just wanted to see if the messages he'd been preaching, the love he'd been modeling for 10 years, had made an impact. He wanted to see if they would treat a stranger in their midst like Jesus would have.

What if I told you, that pastor was me in disguise? What if I told you that last Sunday I was at every service, I stood in the lobby, I sat on the couches, I went into the Soul Café, I browsed in the bookstore. I sat where you're sitting. I sang the songs right next to you. I heard Cameron's sermon. I was here early and I stayed late. I saw you. But here's my question: Did you see me? I smiled at you, did you smile back? Did you look me in the eye, or pretend you didn't see me? Did you shake my hand during the welcome time, or did you intentionally avoid me because I looked a little bit dirty? Did you seek me out and sit with me because I was alone, or did you gravitate toward your friends and the people you already knew? Did you come by and sip coffee with me in the soul café when you noticed me sitting there by myself, or did you play it safe and find another table and people you were familiar with? What did you do? How did you treat me? What did you think when you saw me? Once upon a time a pastor played a trick on his congregation...

Today we're continuing with this series of sermons where we've been trying to answer the question, "Who was Jesus?" We're looking at the Gospel of Luke because the writer, Luke, wanted to present as accurate a picture as possible of the man who had changed his life. Luke wanted others to know about Jesus. What Luke wrote in here was a message that he later was willing to die for. But he knew that the truth he was writing about was bigger than his life and even bigger than his own death. It's a truth he wanted you and me to know about.

Over the last several weeks we have looked at the various portraits of Jesus that Luke has painted. He painted with words and images with details that teach us so much about the Jesus we're trying to understand and trying to follow. We looked at the very early years of Jesus' life, then we looked at his baptism and temptation by the devil, we looked at him as a teacher. And today we look at how Jesus loved people, particularly those who were deemed unlovable, those who were outcasts, those who are on the fringe.

Let's take a quick look at our human condition. Our human nature is that we want to know what categories people fit into. **[SLIDE: "Human nature is to categorize people...]** We tend to put people in categories in our everyday lives. Watching Zoe grow up I've see that this starts at an early age. First she started categorizing people as big or little, then boys and girls, then family and not family. Some day, she'll pick up racial differences—although I hope that doesn't happen too soon. Children are so innocent when it comes to race--they just don't care. Eventually she will learn about rich and poor and middle-class. She'll learn, really without any formal teaching, how to categorize people. She'll learn about Protestants and Catholics, Christians, Jews, Muslims. She'll pick up subtly that some people are categorized as sophisticated or unsophisticated, educated or uneducated, blue collar or white collar. She'll learn that there are Duke fans and then all the others. Most all of the categories that she will learn she will simply pick up. Nobody will sit down and teach them to her. It's just the way we are as human beings. We categorize things, we categorize people.

We use the categories that we learn to size people up and to label them. We divide people into groups. I'm not saying that's bad or good, it's simply the way it is, it's the way we bring order and description to our world, and there's nothing wrong with that. But then we begin to make assumptions about people in certain categories. Accurate or not, we have certain assumptions. And then we begin to gravitate toward people who fit into the same category as we do. We feel more comfortable with them, because they are like us. But then there's the flip side—we're often uncomfortable with people that fall into different categories than us.

Sometimes this makes us look down on people who are different from us. We look down on people for all kinds of reasons—race, income, gender. We look up to people for the same reasons. We feel like some people are better than us—more educated or wealthier or have more prestige. But we can be critical of these folks too! Sometimes we try to find some way to tear them down so they're closer to where we are. That's sort of how we are as human beings.

There's not a person in this room who's immune to this! At least I doubt it. At its worst this comes out in tragic, horrific ways. The worst acts of human history have been a result of how we placed a value on certain categories of people. For thousands of years people bought and sold other human beings believing that some people were simply meant to own other people that they deemed less valuable. Men have done this to women for centuries. One group believed that they were the master race that was meant to rule the world, and that some of the other races were so bad that they needed to be eliminated all together. This is the tragic story of the human condition.

We see it all throughout history. You read the Old Testament and you see it over and over. People oppressing or killing other people because they believe they were better than others. People separating themselves from others so as not be tainted by lesser human beings. There is so much division and hatred that by the end of the Old Testament everything is in a shambles and there is a desperate need for somebody to come and straighten the whole thing out!

That someone was Jesus. He came to teach what God really intended for us as human beings. And if we claim to be Christians we are claiming to be people who follow Jesus, who want to do as Jesus did and taught, who want to see people as Jesus sees them and love people like he loves them. That's what following him is about, at least in part. Luke wants us to know about this man Jesus, so that we know what it means to follow him and be like him.

In Jesus' day people did just like we do today. They categorized people and judged their value by what category they were in. There were religious categories. There were Jews and Gentiles. The Jews thought the Gentiles were hopeless, godless people who were just taking up space, wasting air on the earth.

The Jews put each other into categories. There were the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the Essenes. They all looked at each other as somehow wrong or way off base. Then there were the Jews in the North and the Jews in the South. The Northern Jews were labeled as hicks by the more sophisticated Jews in and around Jerusalem in the South. The middle area of Israel was occupied by the Samaritans who were Jews that had intermarried with the Gentiles and were hated by the Jews in both the North and South. The Samaritans were called dogs by the Jews in the North and South. Then there were the rest of the people in and around that part of the world who were non-religious or nominally religious. They were labeled as sinners. Being around these sinners, these Gentiles, made you unclean. The worst of all the Gentiles were the Romans who occupied that part of the world. They were hated by everybody. With all of these categories everybody had somebody that they could look down their nose at! Everybody knew who the bona-fide sinners were. And if those sinners walked into a place of worship, the people would avoid them and talk about them.

What a huge mess! Kind of like today in some ways...even in our own neck of the woods. But Luke wants us to see Jesus in the midst of all that. He wants us to look closely at Jesus so we see that he is the one human being who has ever lived who didn't look at categories. Most of the good religious people of the day believed that to be a good religious person you had to separate yourself from all the rest of the riff-raff out there. But that's not what Jesus did! He looked beyond the categories and saw the people.

Let's look at some of the people Jesus saw, really saw. If you've been reading Luke you probably realize that Jesus saw people who were **handicapped**. **[PICTURE: A person in a wheelchair]**. Back then if you had some kind of physical illness or handicap, people believed it was because either you or your parents

were sinners. But Jesus didn't see it that way. In his day if you had any one of a number of skin diseases you were put out of the community and labeled a leper. You could not be near other people; you had to leave your home and family. To merely survive you had to beg from a distance **[PICTURE: beggars]** hoping that somebody might have pity and throw you a piece of food to eat or a piece of clothing to keep you warm at night. And if anybody should happen to come toward you, you had to yell out, "Unclean, unclean!"

Lepers were despised. But turn to Luke 5:12. Look what happens here. A leper comes up to Jesus. This is somebody who's heard about him and has heard that he has the power to heal. The leper has the audacity to come up to Jesus. He falls on his face on the ground and says, "Lord, if you are willing you can make me clean." The Bible says that Jesus reaches out and touches him! Nobody, touched lepers! They were contagious, it was like putting your life on the line! Jesus touches him and says, "I am willing, be healed." He didn't care what category that person was in. Jesus healed him. But touching a leper was nothing compared to what Jesus would do later on.

And then there were the **Samaritans**. Instead of going around their part of the country in his travels, like everybody else did, Jesus went through it and spent time with people there.

And Jesus ministered to **women**. At that time in history, and in that culture, women had no rights. They were treated like property. They were cherished by their husbands and loved by their fathers, but they were property. Women didn't go to schools, they could not teach, or preach. A common prayer at that time was, "Lord, I thank you that you did not have me born a Gentile or a woman." But Jesus didn't care about that category either. Many of his disciples were women. He spent time eating with them and teaching them—that was unheard of at that time. Women followed Jesus all the way through his ministry and were there at his crucifixion and the women were the first at the resurrection. Why were they so devoted to Jesus? Because he saw beyond their category. He really saw them and he love them!

Jesus spent time with the **mentally ill, the demon-possessed, the Roman soldiers**—that made some people mad. He spent time with the poor and the wealthy. During the day he spent time with the poor and in the evening he spent time in the homes of the wealthy. He knew--rich or poor--everybody needed to hear what he had to say. He knew everybody needed to feel the love of God no matter what artificial category they had been placed in.

Jesus sums it up by saying this in Luke 19:10. **[SLIDE...] I came to "seek and save what was lost" (Luke 19:10, NIV)**. I guess to Jesus there were just two categories. The lost and the found...and he loved them both! He was saying, "I came to find all people who are not connected to God and to show them God's love!" Jesus was amazing! He was able to move in and out of all these categories of people and see beyond the category to the people themselves.

Now turn to Luke 7 starting with verse 36. Visualize this picture in your mind. Jesus has been invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee. Simon would have been a fairly wealthy man. He invited Jesus over for dinner and then invited all his friends. He and his friends were skeptics. They had heard about Jesus and all his miracles and his time with the lepers and the poor and the outcasts. They had heard rumors that he was the messiah. They didn't believe them, but they wanted to have a look at Jesus...to debunk him more than anything. We know this because of the way Jesus was treated when he arrived at Simon's house. You see, common courtesy at that time was that when a guest arrived at your house, particularly an invited guest, you did certain things. The first thing was to greet him with a kiss on each cheek. It was the kiss of peace. It was a mark of respect. Then the guest's feet were rinsed off in water. The roads were dusty and all they wore were sandals, so when you arrived at a home there was a basin and a towel and the host or one of his servants washed your feet. It was simple hospitality. Then the host would put a drop of scented oil on your head as a blessing. All these things were simple, good manners.

I spent a year in Japan and one of their customs is that any guest who arrives, no matter what time of day or night is given a pair of comfortable slippers to wear and then without hesitation tea is brought out. Thirsty or not you get tea. They don't ask if you want slippers and tea, you get them, and if you **don't** get them you know that you are either not welcomed in that house, or the host has the worst manners imaginable!

Jesus wasn't given any hospitality that day. He went into Simon's home and reclined at the table. Again, you have to imagine in your mind's eye what it was like back then. They didn't sit in chairs around the table to eat; they lay down on the floor with their left arm on a pillow and used their right arm to eat.

You also need to picture in your mind where the table was in the house. When people of wealth had a meal and invited a guest, like Jesus, they liked to show off. If the weather was good, they would often eat out in a courtyard that opened onto the street so people could see who they were hosting. This meal took place in plain sight of anybody who would pass by.

Simon, Jesus, and all the other guests, are gathered around the table talking about God and theology and different fine points of faith, just like you talk about at your dinner table at home! It's all men around the table because women, at that time, ate separately. Besides, it was thought that women wouldn't understand what the men were talking about anyway.

Jesus is being polite and conversing when suddenly an uninvited guest slips into the courtyard and goes right up to Jesus. This isn't **any** uninvited guest. This is a woman. A woman entering into a man's gathering. And not only that but she was a sinner—she was the town prostitute! She was in that category that no Jew wanted to even lay eyes on. She's dressed in her work clothes and barges right in. She's carrying a bottle of expensive perfume. As she stands there, and they all see her, there is an audible gasp! A prostitute in the home of this devout Jew!

She knew who she was looking for. Maybe she had heard him speaking to the crowds earlier that day. She knew about him and she knew that in him all that she had done, all that her life had descended into, all the dirt and darkness in her heart, could be healed. She just knew it!

Remember that Jesus is reclining so his feet are out from the table. She doesn't say a word, maybe because she's crying so hard. She leans over his feet and her tears begin to fall on Jesus' feet. And she undoes her hair and she begins to wipe his feet with her own hair. Can you picture it?

Can you imagine what those Pharisees, those good religious people, were thinking at that moment! "What on earth is she doing? Why is she crying? How does she know Jesus?" The room is frozen as they all watch this scene unfold. We see what Simon is thinking. He's saying to himself, "Doesn't Jesus know what kind of woman this is touching him? Doesn't he know she's a prostitute? Doesn't he know that she is making him unclean?!"

All that Simon could see is that woman's category...what she had done, who she was. He didn't see a woman who was broken and weeping because her whole life nobody had ever loved her, no man had ever treasured her...except this Jesus at that table. She was weeping uncontrollably because up to that point she was a non-person, an object, not a human being. But when she heard Jesus she found that unconditional love that only God can give.

She came looking for two things. They were the two things that Jesus gave to her. He turned and looked at her. Don't miss that. He looked at her. Not at her body as if she were an object. He looked into her eyes, into her soul and he saw her as a child of God! He looked at her and gave her forgiveness and peace. Jesus didn't see her for what she had done, he saw who she could become. And that's how Jesus sees you.

When he looks at you, he doesn't see all the mistakes you've made in the past. He doesn't see the names other people have called you. He doesn't see the labels somebody else has tattooed on you. Instead he sees you as one of his precious children and then he sees you for who you can become, and he loves you.

From this story we can learn what we're supposed to be as Christians. We're supposed to learn that the church should be the one place in the world where we look past all the categories that the rest of the world sees. We should be the one place that exemplifies what Jesus meant when he said, "When you have fed, clothed, visited one of the least of these, you have done this to me. But when you fail to do these to the least of these, you have failed me."

We are the body of Christ, all of us knit together. We're the living body of Jesus in the world and we are to be what he was. This should be the one place where people walk in and say, "Wow! They saw me as a person. Not as a collection of my sins. Not as somebody who is rich or poor, educated or not. They saw me as a precious child of God." And when people see you as a Christian in your workplace they ought to see something in you that sets you apart. That allows you to see people in a different way that goes beyond categories.

That is one thing I'm proud of you as church. You see, we exist to be a place where non-religious and nominally religious people can become deeply committed Christians. I watch you as bring cans and cans of

soup for Crosslines and take your love loaves home and fill them and bring them back. I am so proud of how you invite people here and welcome them when they arrive and be the heartbeat of Christ.

But sometimes churches struggle with living this out. We call ourselves one of the warmest, friendliest places around. But are we just friendly to ourselves, to people that look like us and fit in our box? Or would we welcome the outsider, love the prostitute who comes in off the street looking for forgiveness and peace?

There are people we see here once and never see again. Some of them come and they do look different or smell different. We'd never intentionally marginalize somebody. Every church in the world says that it's the friendliest, and the reality is that we're friendly to each other, we love to greet and talk to people we know. But sometimes we can become blind to our weak spots. I'm convinced that we would never intentionally push people away, shun them, make them feel this way. But there are times when, because the way we label people or categorize people by the way they look or act or smell, we say that they're not our people. But you know, if they're God's people, if they're precious in the sight of Jesus, like that sinner, that prostitute was, then they should be precious in our sight.

So, once upon a time, a preacher played a trick on his congregation...actually the trick is that I was on vacation last week. I did **not** come to church last Sunday in disguise. But what if I had? And more importantly what about those who arrive here each week, some poor, some rich, some hurting, some celebrating, some looking for friendship, some doubtful they'll find it. What about them?

In 1 Corinthians Paul says that we have the mind of Christ. Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. When we do we see people as Jesus sees them and we love them as he loves them. I pray that I have the mind of Christ and pray that you will too. The solution to this problem comes in changing our human nature and only the Holy Spirit can do that, and that happens as we grow in Christ and mature in Christ and invite the Holy Spirit to form us and give us the heartbeat of Jesus. **[PICTURE: "Jesus"]** Jesus was a homeless carpenter and I'd want him to be welcome here, and I know you would too. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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