

Sermon 11 September 2022

The tax collectors and the sinners were gathering around to hear Jesus. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered to themselves. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." The Pharisees claimed to adhere to the law of Moses as well as the tradition of the elders. By creating their own set of rules, they established themselves as righteous and all who didn't comply were labelled sinners.

But Jesus exposed the lie that the religious leaders were righteous and warned them of their true state. Jesus exposed the true state of the hearts of the Pharisees.

...do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is simply for show... (Matthew 23:3-5).

The Pharisees liked to keep themselves 'pure' and separate from people such as tax collectors and sinners. Their main responsibility was to make sure that all the Jewish laws were kept. The Pharisees were very strict and self-righteous, but they were often stricter on others than they were on themselves. The Pharisees paid a great deal of attention to outward ordinances and actions that would make them appear righteous, but they were not as concerned with actually being righteous in their hearts. Appearance was everything but their hearts and their lives were far from Christ.

Jesus mixed and indeed ate with tax collectors and sinners, those that the Pharisees and others rejected. Jesus was all inclusive, He welcomed everyone and for that He was criticised. Jesus welcomed and indeed ate with those that others despised and shunned. Yet Jesus has clearly demonstrated to others the importance of the deep inner spiritual life, connection with God, acting for justice and peace, authenticity and moral integrity. Jesus role modelled these aspects in his care and concern for others.

The world we live in needs more positive role models. New Zealand is certainly no exception. This need is not just for the young, we all need positive role models no matter what age and stage we are in life. We all need people who inspire and motivate us to be the best that we can. Our very best that is played out in words and actions. If we mix with like people we have a high chance of becoming like them and we model that behaviour for others. Was this what Jesus had in mind? Imagine Jesus, the Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners all at the table together. What a diversity of beliefs, views, values and attitudes! Whose would rub off on the others?

I regularly think about the importance and value of positive role models as I teach and do my best to be an example to first year nursing students embarking on the first course, the one I lead, in the Bachelor of Nursing programme. When I am required to make a decision that has the potential to impact on another individual, I think to myself, is what I am about to do, is it reasonable and what will the impact be? I am aware that in this first course, initial impressions are important and that initial impact that I have on the students also needs to be a genuine and a positive one.

Role models and mentors are critical to become our best selves. A role model is a conscious mental companion in the journey of our lives, quietly energising us and encouraging us to aim for our best. And the reverse is true. Without role models we have no reference point, no anchor, no source of inspiration. The absence of positive role modelling leaves a gaping hole in a life, let alone a career. When I think of mis-information and dis-information; recent ram raids, violence, thefts and the like, I think to myself, where are the positive role models and the mentors? The perpetrators are becoming younger and younger, now regularly of primary school age. Who are their positive role models?

It is also true that our role models can come from vastly different genders or backgrounds to our own. I look at the great diversity of students in the class I am currently teaching. There is diversity and thus richness in terms of age, ethnicity, life and health care experience. We learn much from each other. In my own nursing career there were a number of nurses from whom I learned so much, even if they scared me at the time. There are plenty of successful people who take mentoring and inspiration from people very different to themselves.

It is worth taking time to reflect on our own role models. And who we might be a role model for. We may be a role model without even realising it, as others may be quietly inspired by watching the way we carry ourselves. Role modelling anywhere we are, in the workplace, during our recreation activities and indeed in the church. As Christians we have a responsibility to role model to others, regardless of whether there are people of faith or not, and how would we know? Every person is valuable to God.

I thought about this too as I reflected on who Jesus interacted with, the Pharisees, the tax collectors and the sinners. Jesus engaged with all kinds of different people from all walks of life. This wasn't always viewed in a positive light by the Pharisees. Jesus ate with people the Pharisees clearly didn't approve of and they were not quiet about how they felt.

We hear about the shepherd God as he searches for that one lost sheep. There are only ninety-nine when he has the responsibility for one hundred sheep. Then there is the woman God who loses that one silver coin. She had ten coins initially. Would the Pharisees consider leaving the 99 and searching for the one? Would they wonder if it was worth it? Perhaps the

Pharisees would consider the one to be undeserving of such 'special' treatment. But look at the joy when the one is found. There is genuine rejoice, there is a party with neighbours and friends.

That shepherd and that woman, there is God. The one sheep, that one coin is found. There is rejoicing. In the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety nine who do not need to repent. The angels of God will rejoice over one sinner who repents. The self righteous Pharisees lacked this joy, but God's gracious acceptance was wonderful news to the ordinary men and women who heard him. God shows mercy to even the worst of sinners. The grace of our Lord is poured out abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. God doesn't give up on us, not even one of us.

Luke correlates the lost sheep and silver coin with sinners and the rejoicing ones with heavenly beings. Commentators frequently associate the shepherd and the woman with God, prudently associating God with these characters *after* the sought-after object has been lost but not before. If God is the one who searches, is God also the one who loses the objects? To lose a sinner would be tantamount to losing part of God-self, inasmuch as the sinner bears the imprint of the Creator. The recovery of the sinner is, then, not simply the recovery of something that has been lost; it is the recovery of God's image-bearer. What is more, it is the recognition that God's imprint is indelible—even on tax collectors and sinners.

In response to the charge that Jesus associates with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus's response is, "Obviously." Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus dines with the poor and the rich, the tax collectors, sinners, *and* the Pharisees. What, then, might Luke be trying to imprint upon us? In the case of these parables, at least, it seems Luke invites us to the table with the tax collectors and sinners, inviting us to find God's image in all that seems lost, for "nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37, 18:27).

Every single soul is important to God. The loss may not so much be external as internal. Due to life change in circumstances or a specific situation we may be lost to God for a period of time. Perhaps loss of employment or loss of a relationship, may be a health challenge or a significant change in a family member or friend. As part of that loss we might think: why God, or God, how could you, or even where are you in this situation God, have you forgotten me? We might be angry with God, questioning or bargaining, we might stop talking to or listening to and for God while in the midst of the situation.

God doesn't stop searching for us while we are lost. God is the seeker and Jesus is God's agent in the endeavour. What do the 99 do while the 1 lost is being found? Are the 99 in

their own kind of wilderness during this time? The COVID pandemic, wars, conflict, unrest and climate change have created their own kind of lost and a different kind of wilderness. People who have lost their meaning and purpose, their sense of safety and security, relationships have changed, routines have been upset. Losses that lay deep within. Core beliefs and values once crucial have been and are being re-evaluated, priorities are reassessed.

We cannot return to the world as it was pre pandemic and yet we are not yet certain what the future will look like. We might be questioning God out of our fear, our anxiety, our uncertainty amid on-going upheaval. God, where are you leading us and what will that look like? Just as the woman did looking for the lost coin, we too are sweeping our spiritual house and searching carefully for signs of the new world. We are looking to God for reassurance and comfort.

How many have we helped God save? We won't know but God will know. We don't need to know a person well to have a profound impact on their life. I have often thought to myself: what do people who don't have a faith draw on in terms of resources. Well perhaps they draw on us, not consciously. Perhaps we impact on them, not consciously, in our role as God's agents. Bringing others to God, those He seeks out.

Nursing students are often anxious about not knowing what to do or what to say; or of doing or saying the wrong thing. I remind them that sometimes it is not necessary to do or to say anything. Sometimes our presence as nurses is all that is required. Our presence can be powerful. It is the same for us, the faithful, our presence may be all that is needed..... to bring an individual to God as He seeks the lost. We might be uncertain how to pray or what to pray for. Perhaps we need to sit quietly and listen out for God.

In the world that we live in, where we might feel exhausted and disheartened, how do we maintain joy in the finding of the lost? The absence of joy closes us off to God's labours through us. The burden of seeking the lost is not ours alone. We are the ones who rejoice in God's work among us. Our work involves preparing ourselves and our communities to receive those God brings in back in to the fold and figure out a way to work together in this new world.

God continues to rejoice in us. Putting the pieces of the puzzle into place in God's community is a real cause for celebration. The persistence and resilience of the Christian community in recent struggles is gratifying to witness and provides important role modelling for others who are struggling. The joy of God is Good News, both for the 99 and for the 1.

Those Pharisees were all for show, their hearts were not in the right place. Their intentions were not what God was looking for. Jesus interacted with those others cast aside as being unworthy. If we always mix with those we are comfortable with, we will not have an impact or make a difference in the lives of others. If we live as Jesus lived our paths will cross with all kinds of people, Pharisees and sinners alike, as agents of God through the role model image of Jesus Christ. Every single soul is important to God.

AMEN