

13 February 2022

The Good Old Days / When Men Were Men

Luke 7:36-50

We Christians are typically conservative. I don't mean in the political sense – I'm not quite sure what political conservatism is anymore – but in the general sense. Christians are cautious about change. This is not a bad thing. In our conservatism, we have continued to proclaim the same gospel for two millennia, that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, that he became human, was killed, and rose from the dead to change our relationship with life and with God. We hold to the same creeds that our founders did, and have continued to worship with the same sacraments, using almost the same words. And because we have conserved these core teachings and practices, we have managed to become a global Church that has adapted to widely different cultures and contexts. When you cling firmly to what is important, that enables you to be flexible on other things: church governance, music, worship style, and so on. Each local congregation can adapt to its own culture, seeking the best way to proclaim the timeless message in its unique context. Of course, this only works if the church knows which is the timeless message and which is the cultural adaptation. We have to remember which teachings must be held firm, and which are the external trappings. If we forget that distinction, then our natural tendency toward conservatism stops being a strength and becomes just a generalized grumpiness and resistance to any change, wherever we may find it.

Right now in America is a good time to remember this, because we are living through a time of incredibly rapid social change. Our country's racial makeup is changing with astonishing speed, as the traditional ethnic majority (that's us, mostly) becomes a shrinking percentage of the population. Did you see the early releases from the 2020 census? We white people aren't just a shrinking percentile; we're shrinking in raw numbers. We're dying faster than we're reproducing. We are within years of the time when we so-called white people will be just one minority among all the others. But we aren't just changing in racial makeup, but in social norms, too – especially as they relate to gender. Sure, we had a Women's Movement all the way back in the 70s, when a lot of discriminatory laws got changed to offer equal rights to women, but now it feels as if, you know, some people are starting to take it seriously. It's changing the workplace and academia and dating and politics and . . . Ghostbusters. And then there's homosexuality. Twenty years ago, 75% of Americans were opposed to same sex marriage. Now 75% approve. People, social norms don't change that fast. We are on an incredible roller coaster ride, and we shouldn't be surprised that some people are not happy with all this change.

Now contrary to what many think, human beings are not afraid of change. If you won the Powerball tomorrow, that would change your life, but I wouldn't expect you to turn it down out of fear of change. No, what people are afraid of is loss. So, in this time of change - of increasing prominence for black and brown people, for women, and for LGBTQ people, who would you expect to be resistant? Those who feel that these changes represent loss, causing them to lose power or prominence or status: primarily white people, especially heterosexual men.

And so, one of the strongest social movements right now, driven by the power of sheer panic, is what is sometimes called atavism. That means the desire to return to a previous time, when things were supposedly better. You could call it the "Good Old Days" syndrome, but it's more than nostalgia. All of us secretly believe that the music we listened to in high school was

better than any music since (although most of you are wrong), but atavism is deeper than that. It is the sense that the way things used to be was not just better but was *right*, was how things *should* be, how they were ordained by biology or by God, and the only solution to today's problems is to halt all those changes and actually return to those days. As you would expect in a time of such wide-ranging change as ours, modern atavism is broad and diffuse, but you can identify it by its rabid rejection of anything that represents change from their idealized past: political correctness, feminism, multiculturalism, affirmative action, wokeness, social justice warriors, immigration reform, Black Lives Matter, globalism, and critical race theory. We even elected a president whose entire platform was to stop social change: Make America Great Again. Realizing that all this stems from fear of change and a desire to return to a time when things were good helps to explain why the fight is currently centered in school history classes. If your core belief is in that idealized past, then when someone points out it wasn't ideal for everyone, it feels like a slap in the face. It's not just a historical disagreement; it's an attack on your belief system.

That's right. Belief system. We have been talking for the past month about modern idols that people put in the place of God, and now at last we've come to this week's idol: the way things used to be. In our time of rapid change, many feel wistful about things that are gone, but for some, atavism has become their religion, their fanatical obsession, their god. Let me illustrate with just one segment of this atavistic faith: a new men's movement. As I said earlier, the 1970s Women's Movement showed some policy successes, but laws are easier to change than attitudes. Universities and workplaces continued to be dominated by men, especially at the highest levels. Strong, successful women continued to be viewed as hard and somehow *unfeminine*, for behaving exactly as men in the same positions might behave. Women were still defined largely by their husbands and judged by their child-rearing, and in movies beautiful women still existed primarily as prizes to be awarded to the male heroes at the end. But just in the past twenty years or so, the ground has shifted. More women are getting advanced degrees than men, moving into positions of higher power, and they're not necessarily looking for the old MRS. degree. Women are not keeping to their old roles. Some men are panicking, and a new movement has arisen, calling for men to re-claim their rightful, dominant place.

This movement ranges from the relatively benign psychology professor and podcast celebrity Jordan Peterson, who challenges men to stand up straight and clean their rooms, to the Proud Boys, to dark corners of the internet, where "involuntary celibates" (or, "incels") meet in chat rooms to talk about how they have been mistreated by women, to which the others respond with the acronym AWALT. All Women Are Like That. But, benign or frankly frightening, they all agree on one basic doctrine: men are intended to rule, women are designed to submit, and society will never be right again until the rational male principle of order subdues feminine chaos again. They have their community; they have their doctrine; they even have their martyrs. Some of our recent mass killings have been perpetrated by men vowing revenge on the women who have declined to submit to them, and on the changing society that has permitted this state of affairs.

You know what? Let's pause and read some scripture. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 7, verses 36-50:

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood

behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—

that she is a sinner.' ⁴⁰*Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.'* *'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.'* ⁴¹*'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five*

hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²*When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?'* ⁴³*Simon answered, 'I suppose the one*

for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' *And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.'*

⁴⁴*Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and*

dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵*You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not*

stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶*You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.* ⁴⁷*Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; for she*

has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' ⁴⁸*Then he said to*

her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' ⁴⁹*But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'* ⁵⁰*And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has*

saved you; go in peace.'

After what I've been describing, Jesus can be a breath of fresh air, can't he? But think about this situation. Jesus is visiting Simon, a prominent Pharisee, a man of influence and importance, in his home, when this nameless woman about whom we know only that her reputation is soiled, crashes the party, throws herself weeping at Jesus' feet, washing them with her tears and anointing them with oil. From the perspective of social rank, Simon is at the top. And in terms of every societal measure – gender, importance, wealth, reputation, and moral rectitude – this woman is at the very bottom. And Jesus honors her, celebrates her, and offers her – and, noticeably, *only* her – forgiveness of her sins. From a cultural and social perspective, this is a profoundly subversive response.

This week, as I prepared this sermon, I tried to think of even one time that Jesus showed any interest in social structures or norms. Either for or against. I got nothing. His ministry and teaching are so separate from his society that it could be transplanted to any culture or time period, with minimal change, and it would still be powerful, and still be subversive. So if he's not interested in social norms, what *does* Jesus care about? What prompted him to elevate this woman over the wealthy toff with the seminary degree? Why did he flout every convention like that? What was it about her? She loved. It is actually that simple.

To go back to where I started this sermon, *this* is why we need to distinguish between the linchpins of our faith – especially the gospel story – and the cultural milieu in which we practice it. We inhabit a time of social change, and many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are calling on the church to cling to or to try to restore an imaginary past when things were better. Do not bow down to that idol. Our task on earth, in whatever culture we find ourselves, is to love. Love greatly, love deeply, love indiscriminately, love subversively, and in that way we may be lights in the world that shine beyond the fleeting ups and downs of culture.