

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
Sunday June 17th 2007
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“How to love”**

So, why do people come to church? It is an easy question, it is not an easy answer... in fact, I remember quite vividly an uneasy silence descending upon a men's bible study when someone asked, in light of obvious sub-christian behaviour, “so, why is it that people come to church?”.

What answer would you give? Well, of course, our first response must include somewhere, somehow the statement that God brings us here. We may not know it, we may not feel it, we may not even want to believe it... but God has brought you and me here for a purpose today, this morning... it is our task and our joy to discover the divine reason!

Some come because of sin... they carry a burden of sin and they wish that burden to be eased, they look for acceptance... forgiveness and absolution. You remember the story of President Calvin Coolidge who, returning home after a Sunday service, was asked, “What was the sermon about?”. “Sin” the president replied. “And what did he say about sin?”. “Oh”, said the president, “he was agin it”.

Some because of love... they want to experience afresh the divine love for their souls, they want comfort where human love has failed and they want strength to love more deeply, more consistently, more abundantly.

Sometimes churches choose one of these reasons and they extremist... either they focus so much on sin that they seem to engage almost continually in “finger pointing” and “blame assigning”. Other churches focus so much on “love” that they begin to merit the description of “falling for everything, standing for nothing”.

Ideally the church is a place for the Ahabs (of our old Testament story) who need be challenged and rebuked for their selfishness but

also a place for the Naboths who needs be given a place of security, acceptance, love and hope.

We are concerned with love but not love in a feeble, soppy, insipid way but a love that is fully integrated with commitment, even sacrifice.

St. John writes, “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...” and “Herein is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us first”.

And St. Paul exults, “God shows His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” and “The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me”.

A man once confided to his friend that he was finding intimacy difficult, and relationships a challenge. His friend suggested, “Go out, find a book on the subject... buy it and read it”. Walking past a bookshop, the man thought he had found the ideal book. Imagine though his disappointment when the book “How to Love” was not a book on intimacy but rather the third volume of an encyclopedia!!! He wanted to read a book to learn about love – Jesus wants us to learn how to love, not about love.

Look at today’s Gospel passage... the woman learnt, and Jesus taught, this powerful truth, “he/she who is forgiven much, loves much; he/she who is forgiven little, loves little”.

So, how to love? Be forgiven. Though this is to be no excuse for sin... the Galatian Christians tried that one, and Paul quickly rebuked them!

Be forgiven... this is primary, this is a must, this is essential.

Note forgiveness is profound, it is often challenged and it is life-changing.

1. Forgiveness is profound! Luke tells us that the woman was “a woman in the city, a sinner”. It is altogether reasonable to believe that this woman was a prostitute and that part of the shock caused to the religious people was that such a person was touching Jesus.

The woman brings the precious ointment to Jesus and he accepts the gift with love and thanks. He must have known that which paid for the ointment but such is the profound nature of forgiveness that all now was made clean. And she wiped his feet with her hair... St. Paul writes that the hair of a woman is her glory and proclaims her femininity and , therefore, it was to covered in church. The woman uses that which proclaimed her beauty to dry his feet and this was accepted... such is the profound nature of forgiveness. There is nothing... nothing...nothing that we have done, or we have thought that God cannot forgive. How dare we believe that we can concoct a sin beyond the power of God's forgiveness... it is impossible!

2. Forgiveness is often challenged. Almost as soon as the woman hears the liberating words of Jesus (words of forgiveness) so the religious establishment begin to carp and adversely criticize. Friends, there will always be pharisaical voices, devilish voices, that will whine or whisper, seduce or shout in our ears that we are not, cannot be, forgiven. There will always be those who act as a friend's Aunt Mabel who behaved as if "God had gone on vacation and she was appointed to fill in until his return" – there is no such person, for when God forgives He has the first and last word... always. Today, Father's Day, is a day when many a child and many a parent need to hear liberating words of forgiveness and redemption; today, Father's Day, is a day when negative, carping voices need be ignored!

3. And, thirdly, forgiveness needs to be life-changing. It was God's profound and thorough forgiveness that enabled the woman to serve Jesus; it was God's presence and grace in forgiveness that enabled the woman to be calm and serene in the midst of calumny and accusation but now... forgiveness had to be life-changing and so the commandment is given, and the commandment is heard, "Go in peace"... go out and share with others the forgiveness that you have so liberally received; go out and share with others the peace that has been lavished upon you. This is all life-changing stuff... this is what authentic forgiveness will always do to us.

A friend, Mary, recently told me this story. Mary for years had a close friend, a faithful companion, who spoke to her regularly and deeply. But though matter how often she spoke to Mary, she always began the conversation with these words... "You know that I love, don't you?".

Well, thus God begins every conversation with us... “You know that I love, don’t you?” and the depth of his love is shown by the depth of his forgiveness.

Alleluia, Amen.

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