

## Sermon: 'Responding to underserved generosity'

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Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

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### **LESSON: Luke 7:36-40**

Sometimes we complain that we live in a world which is full of greed and selfishness. But it's also true that we live in a world where there is a huge amount of goodness and kindness.

It's interesting to reflect on some of the motivation for this kindness and goodness.

Over the past 30 years many people in this country have discovered that there can be fun and excitement in being kind and good.

The London Marathon has been staged each year for the past 30 years and now involves large numbers of people. Over 36,000 people took part in this year's marathon and the amount of money raised for charity now exceeds 40 million pounds a year. A huge amount of energy and commitment is put into doing something that will help others.

Another annual event is Comic Relief Day when our television programmes are dominated by events all over the country with people wearing red noses, and where people are having a lot of fun raising money to help other people. Last year 82 million pounds was raised for charity. In these sorts of events people are motivated to acts of kindness and goodness because it becomes fun.

Another reason why people are motivated to acts of kindness and goodness is pity. Pity can be aroused by pictures of innocent children suffering from the ravages of war in an African country, or by stories about the situation of homeless young people in our British cities, or by an enormous earthquake such as the one in Haiti some months ago. The devastating massacres in the Lake District 10 days ago led to a great outpouring of love and kindness that seems to well up so naturally. And, for a short while, we see something beautiful in human nature.

Another reason why people are motivated to acts of kindness and goodness is when they become inspired by someone's vision of what needs to be done. Today we have been asked to remember the work of Methodist Homes for the Aged throughout British Methodism. Methodist Homes for the Aged had its beginnings when a number of people caught the vision of Revd. Walter Hall. As a Methodist minister living in the days before the Welfare State he had seen, at first hand, the problems of older people who, at that time, with no means of supporting themselves would have to spend the rest of their lives in the workhouse. He had a vision of what could be done to give security and dignity to people in their old age. Many other people caught that vision

and the work of Methodist Homes began in 1943, an amazing vision for war time when you might have assumed that most people would be pre-occupied with survival for themselves.

Another reason why people are motivated to acts of kindness and goodness is a sense of the moral law. When Gordon Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer and then Prime Minister he would sometimes speak passionately about the need to give aid to developing countries. For him, this stemmed from a set of values that he had been part of his life since childhood, instilled by the moral code preached by his father who was a minister in the Church of Scotland. There are many people – not always religious - who “feel in their bones” a moral duty to help others. A sense of justice and fairness drives them to show kindness and goodness.

That is just a quick reflection as to why people act with kindness and goodness. But our gospel reading this morning takes us to a different level of motivation.

The story is about a woman.

We don't know her name.

We don't know much detail about her life.

But we do know that she had a reputation for living a sinful life, usually presumed to have been a prostitute and we can safely assume that she had not been invited to the banquet that was taking place in the home of Simon, the Pharisee!

But the homes of wealthy people were built around an open courtyard, and often in the courtyard there would be a garden and a fountain and, in warm weather, meals would be eaten there. It was quite a common custom, when a Rabbi was at a meal in those kinds of houses, that all kinds of people would come in to listen to the Rabbi teaching.

We don't know whether she had had any previous contact with Jesus, but she had some real awareness of Him and a real understanding as to the way that Jesus behaved towards people like her.

What we do know is that she came with intent! This was no chance meeting or casual visit. She brought with her an alabaster jar of perfume.

Whatever contact she might or might not have had, personally, with Jesus in the past she knew enough about Him to know that she would be accepted and not turned away by Jesus, despite her reputation.

She knew that, whilst other people might frown and “tut tut”, Jesus would accept her and treat her with dignity. And she knew that this was more than she deserved.

And it was this awareness, that Jesus was going to be treat her with undeserved generosity that led to what was both an emotional and a practical response.

The emotional response was tears. And, because she was kneeling close to Jesus, the tears fell on his feet. Her tears came from a heart that was touched with gratitude for undeserved love.

The practical response was to wipe his feet dry with her hair and then to pour precious perfume on them.

The undeserved generosity of God's love draws out a response which is both emotional and practical.

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Let me tell you two stories.

For the past two or three years I have kept contact with a woman in prison. She was a woman I knew who lived in a town where I had been a minister although – in those days – she was a humanist with little time for religion. She was put into prison for a very distasteful crime and abandoned by just about all her friends. I visited her, on a number of occasions, in prison and was delighted to find she had become a committed Christian whilst spending some time in Jamaica. It was because she had become a Christian that she returned to this country and "faced the music", was arrested and sent to prison. She had become estranged from her husband, but after she was sent to prison it was her husband who was about the only person to stand by her. Recently she has been released from prison and her husband is helping her to build a new life, although they are not able to live together as she has a new identity. She wrote to me a week or two ago and told me that some friends of her husband invited them both to a meal. "I've told them I would like to go" she said "but I've warned them that I shall probably be full of tears – I always am, when someone is kind to me". She is deeply aware of being the recipient of undeserved love and is touched to the core of her being.

That is a story of emotional response to undeserved love, arising from her faith in a God who has loved her more than she feels she deserves.

The other story is one that some of us were privileged to hear very recently on a Wednesday night when a lady called Amanda Williams came to speak to our Wednesday at Westminster meeting. She came to talk about "Grandma's", which is a charity set up to give help and support to children suffering from HIV and AIDS. The story she told us was a very personal one. It began when she was a young woman, full of herself, out to enjoy herself, set up in a job to make as much money as she possibly could, and without a thought for God or much regard for other people. Through a series of events her life suddenly changed. She had an encounter with God and she realised that her worth depended not on what she could earn or what status she could achieve in the business world and she invited Jesus into her life.

Her life was transformed and her future was set in a completely different direction and she found herself doing voluntary work amongst people suffering from HIV and AIDS here in London. She was overwhelmed with a sense of the generous way God had dealt with her and her response became a very practical one. She became the driving force in setting up a service for children affected by HIV and AIDS that now operates with a full-time team, over 100 volunteers and has worked in London with over 500 families and has now set up projects in both North and South India. Amanda's story is a most moving one.

Those stories remind us that the undeserved generosity of God's love – accepting us when we don't deserve to be accepted and treating us with dignity when our rightful

place would be on the rubbish tip – still draws out both powerful emotional and practical responses.

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And the response of the sinful woman in our gospel story stands in stark contrast to the behaviour of Simon, the Pharisee – the respectable host!

We don't know why Simon had invited Jesus to his home. Probably he liked to entertain well known people and wanted to have the signature of Jesus of Nazareth in his "visitor's book"!

But he neglected to have his honoured guest's feet washed, the act of normal courtesy.

As a Pharisee he would have been concerned to "observe the laws of God" – but it wasn't out of any sense of gratitude for what God had done for Him, and it left him with a cold heart, a calculating code of behaviour, and a mind ready to sit in judgement on other people.

"If this man were a prophet he would know what sort of woman this is", Simon said. Yes, Jesus did know. Jesus knew that she was a woman who had lived a bad life and needed to be different and would respond to grace.

And Jesus also knew the hardness in the heart of Simon – and the reason why he accepted this invitation to a meal was not because He wanted to sign Simon's visitors' book but because He wanted to offer the grace of God. And what happened?

The woman responded to undeserved generosity with great gratitude.

but

Simon didn't even recognise the undeserved generosity that he was being offered.

Where do you stand? Where do I stand?

Are we like Simon, the Pharisee, proud of what we have done for God,

or

are we like the woman, simply overwhelmed by what God has done for us?

We have a saviour who came to earth to share our humanity, who suffered undeserved cruelty and died in awful pain on a cross in order that we might live within the love and forgiveness of a gracious God.

We sometimes sing the song: "Only by grace".

"Only by grace can we enter, only by grace can we stand,

Not by our human endeavour, but by the blood of the Lamb.

Into your presence you call us, you call us to come.

Into your presence you draw us, now by your grace we come.

Lord, if you mark our transgressions who would stand?

Thanks to your grace we are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb".

I began by asking us to think about some of the motives that make people act with kindness and goodness.

The most powerful motive is the one that is at the heart of this gospel story.

As the biblical scholar, George Caird, put it:

“Greatest love is the product of greatest forgiveness”.

And our world needs men and women who are people of compassion and kindness and who are motivated not just by the opportunity for excitement or out of pity (which can be occasional and even haphazard) but compassion and kindness which wells up in gratitude for undeserved love. That kind of compassion and kindness comes from a spring which never dries up.

I finish by sharing with you a story told many years ago by the great Indian Christian teacher, Sadhu Sundar Singh.

He told the story of two lads who were each fined 500 rupees for some crime against the laws of their state. One lad was the son of a wealthy father, and his fine was paid at once. The other lad was poor and he had to remain in prison whilst his mother slaved all day long carrying stones, to earn enough money to pay his fine. The stones would fall on her hands and cut her and make the blood flow. When she came to visit him, the lad would see through the bars of his prison the rough hands that were stretched out to him. “Mother” he asked, “what is this wound in your hand? What is this blood on your finger?” “I have to work in pain to save you,” she explained. When at last she had saved the sum of money needed, her son was released. Soon after, he met his former associate who tempted him again to the kind of offence that had led to their punishment. But he replied: “Never again. Your release came easily; but I was saved by my mother’s toil, by the wounds in her hands and by her blood”.

And that is pretty close to where we stand with God!

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