

Person Centred Church – Person Centred Pastoring

Luke 7:36-50

A vicar went to visit an elderly woman from his church who had just had an operation. As he was sitting there talking with her, he noticed a bowl of peanuts on the stand next to the bed. He began to eat them, and soon it was time for him to leave. When he got up he noticed he had eaten all of her peanuts.

"Mrs Jones," he said, "I'm so sorry I ate all your peanuts."

"That's okay vicar, " she replied. "I already sucked all of the chocolate off them."

Today the subject is Person-Centred Pastoring. Apart from the fact that he'd probably have healed her and left the hospital much sooner than the Vicar, I wonder how Jesus would have been with that woman. Would he have needed to raid her peanuts in order to keep himself dutifully at her bedside? Let's take a look at an episode in which Jesus deals amazingly with two very different pastoral situations at the same time. It's the story in Luke's gospel where he's invited to a dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee, only to be interrupted by the visit of a woman.

Jesus: Pastorally Open

The first thing I notice about Jesus is that he's *pastorally open*.

Classically, Jesus' pastoral openness in this episode is revealed by his complete, unassuming acceptance of the woman. Unlike the other people at the meal he allows no preconceptions to shape his openness to her. We read, "**a woman who had led a sinful life in that town**" came in. Most likely, the phrase means she was a prostitute and was known as such. Later on, Simon says, "**If this man were a prophet he would know who is touching him, and what kind of a woman she is.**" (v.39) So there's a slight joke going on - "we know who she is" nudge, nudge – but it's also scandalous that a religious man – Jesus - should accept the physicality of a prostitute, and in the very home of another particularly religious person. The very fact that they *think* Jesus doesn't know who she is demonstrates the openness with which he accepts. He acts as if he doesn't even know – when in fact, the ensuing story makes plain that he does know. What a lesson for us in our pastoral care.

Carl Rogers

My next three points all pick up on the language of Carl Rogers, who pioneered person-centred, humanistic counselling in the 1950s and 60s. Rogers grew up in a devout Christian home, but the core of his counselling insight was humanistic and could be practised regardless of whether a person believes or not. So although Rogers didn't counsel explicitly as a Christian, many Christian therapists today still draw upon his insights in their work.

Rogers based his approach on on three classic planks: (1) Unconditional Positive Regard, which requires establishing a non-judgemental environment for the client to express themselves; (2) Empathic Understanding, which means the client's perspective is understood and given value; (3) Congruence, which means the counsellor is authentic and transparent – there's no air of authority leaving the client to guess at what the counsellor is “really like”. One reason why many Christian therapists are drawn to the Person-Centred approach is that we see these traits so clearly in Jesus.

Jesus: Non-Judgmental

So let's move on the second point I want to make about Jesus' pastoral style in this episode. The first was that he was open. The second is that he was non-judgemental. Jesus received the woman as she was. All the people in that room knew what kind of a woman this was – or thought they did. She too would have been well aware of their thoughts and assumptions, yet she remains with Jesus. Clearly she feels totally safe with him – he's created a safe space for her to express herself. Jesus' non-judgmental attitude is so clear that others in the room think he can't know who she really is. But being non-judgmental doesn't mean not believing in right and wrong. It means suspending those judgments for the sake of giving the other person space to be. As a person-centred pastor, and courageously unafraid of criticism, he's offering her unconditional positive regard.

Jesus: Empathic & Understanding

Thirdly, *Jesus understands the woman*. She's weeping. It's hard to weep in the presence of someone who doesn't make you feel safe, or with whom you have no sense of connection. In his book, “The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy” Brian Thorne describes a client who threw herself into his arms and wept for quarter of a hour without restraint into his new corduroy jacket. Such risky behaviour would have been impossible but for the strong bond which had developed between them and the fact that he allowed it to develop whilst safely holding the boundaries.

“I knew that alone I could do nothing for her. Everything would depend on how she and I could be together, how we could collaborate (literally work together) in the exploration of her life, its difficulties and challenges. She needed me, but I needed her if we were to accompany each other in this hazardous journey. As a person-centred therapist I believe that the resources are in the client and are waiting to be discovered if only I can offer a relationship of unconditional affirmation characterised by deep and compassionate empathy.” (Thorne, p.76)

This sense of a joint venture, a journey together for which both persons participation is fully necessary, is also so clearly visible in Jesus' ministry – his pastoral encounters which always developed through a revelatory dialogue with people, his miracles which always required faith from somebody somewhere, and his mission which always depended on the collaboration of friends.

Here with the woman, Jesus takes the risk of trust. He allows her to remain there weeping, and then allows her to become even more intimate, washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her

hair. Jesus exercises trust in her and in the process and this shows that he values what she has to bring, he understands it, he enters empathically into her inner world and he can do so because Jesus too knows brokenness and is not afraid of it.

Jesus: Affected by Others & Congruent

Fourthly, *Jesus allows himself to be affected by the woman.*

We read, **“She stood behind him, weeping, and began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them.”** (v.38) It would have been impossible for Jesus not to have been affected by this physical attention – the dampness of her tears, the heat of her face, the softness of her lips, the caress of her hair. It's act of love. It's not simply an sorrowful outpouring. She must have heard of Jesus, perhaps listened to him speak, or maybe even had some encounter with him before. Now she's sought him out to show devotion to him. And later Jesus describes her actions as “loving much”.

Sometimes people teach that good pastoral work requires non-involvement with the other, a “blank sheet”, non-emotive exterior. The Person-Centred approach, however, speaks of “congruence”. If you are happy, or moved, or shocked on the inside, it should show on the outside.

Someone wrote this limerick:

I went for advice from my Pastor.
It really was quite a disaster.
After listening so well, for what seemed a long spell,
He told me, “Just mimic the Master.”

I suspect that Pastor was of the “non-involvement” school, which, in a well-meaning effort to point people to Jesus also feels they should keep themselves as unobtrusive as possible. But on the subject of “mimicking the Master”, when we look at Jesus in pastoral situations he gets very personally involved. He wept at the tomb of Lazarus, for example.

Person-Centred pastoring requires the same three elements as Person-Centred Counselling: Unconditional Positive Regard, Empathic Understanding, and Congruence. They're my three middle points. But there's a fifth aspect of Jesus the pastor which we can see in this episode: Jesus releases the woman.

Jesus: Releasing

In v.48, Jesus brings the session to a close in a way that only he can truly do: v.48 **“Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.””** And as the other guests are wondering how an ordinary man can forgive sins like that, he says to her, **“Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”** (v.50) Very often as pastors or carers we find ourselves getting entangled or enmeshed in the lives of people we care for. But Jesus shows that the pastoral care of others isn't for our own sakes. It's not so we can feel good – or even so we can feel bad. Jesus releases the woman to get on with the rest of her new life.

Jesus and Simon

Well, when we read this passage we tend to concentrate on Jesus and the woman, but most of it is actually taken up with the conversation between. What we see here is in fact a dual pastoral encounter: Jesus is meeting two completely different people at the same time, over the same issue, (more or less), and from a pastoral point of view he handles them both in exactly the same manner. Let's look briefly at Jesus and Simon.

Jesus: Openness with Simon

Once again we see that he's pastorally open. Last week, looking at Matthew's gospel, we saw how powerfully Jesus unleashed his fury against the Pharisees, yet here in Luke 7 he accepts a Pharisee's invitation to dinner. Whatever he thought about these people as a class, and however furious he was at the effect of their teachings, all of that was set aside when it came to personal encounter.

Many years ago I was introduced to an elderly gentleman who was sitting down on a very low settee and something about his sparked off a load of ugly prejudice in me. I didn't go over to greet him, but remained aloof. I was embarrassed humbled when he himself, with some difficulty, levered himself up and off the settee in order to come over and shake my hand. The cruelty of my prejudice was exposed by his grace. Jesus, was a person-centred pastor. He entered that house and reclined at table. And if we'd be like him there can be no room for prejudice in us likewise. So here is Jesus: Pastorally Open.

Jesus: Non-Judgmental with Simon

Secondly, he's non-judgmental, offering unconditional positive regard. As I said earlier, we know from other passages Jesus' fury at the way Pharisees held people in judgement. He was well aware of Simon's disapproving thoughts towards the woman, yet he suspends the reactions he might have had in order to offer Simon the space afforded by unconditional positive regard. Jesus has a conversation in which to engage Simon, a journey on which to accompany him.

Jesus: Understanding of Simon

Thirdly, then, Jesus shows empathic understanding. He's in a particular social context, the guest of a man genuinely interested in his teaching. He knows where Simon's at and the issues of culture and protocol which mattered intensely to him at that point. So Jesus takes Simon on a journey in a culturally appropriate way by engaging him in a conversation: **“Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me teacher.” “Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the means to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which one of them will love him more?” (vv.40-42)**

And so the conversation continues. And through it, Simon comes to understand the reason why he too should have an unconditional positive regard for the woman. Jesus shows empathic

understanding to Simon by challenging him in a manner that maintains the culture of teaching and learning which Simon had set up by hosting the dinner party.

Jesus: Congruent with Simon

And Jesus *does* challenge Simon. Isn't it fascinating: Jesus offers no challenge at all for the woman, who most of us would assume was a person who needed good "disciplining" - yet he reserves his challenge for Simon who was already well taught in Biblical morality. Yet Simon's hospitality had been perfunctory instead of personal and Jesus is disturbed by the contrast between his host's love and that of the "sinful" woman: **"You did not give me any water for my feet... you did not give me a kiss... you did not give me oil for my head..."** (vv.44-46) Jesus' challenge shows congruence. He's disturbed at the contrast between the woman's personal attention and Simon's perfunctory attention – and Jesus isn't afraid to let this disturbance show, pointing it out quite clearly as his pastor to his host. This dual pastoral encounter of this episode between Jesus, the woman, and Simon the Pharisee reveal Jesus to be a persistent, pastoral, person-centred risk-taker.

Jesus: Releasing with Simon

Finally, then, just as he released the woman to go on her way, so also Jesus releases Simon. He leaves him with a whole range of things to chew over, to work out for himself, to ponder on, to take in, and to allow to impact on the rest of his life. Or will it? What will happen to Simon? We don't know. Jesus is signing off with both parties, and each of them have journeys to continue in the light of his words.

Will they take those words on board? Where will they go? What will happen next? Even the most intimate person-centred counselling comes to an end. The counsellor or pastor lets go, and thereby allows the others to let go too and find their way forward.

Jesus and Our Pastoring

Of course, our own pastoring in the church isn't quite the same as that. In your pastoring or my pastoring, whoever we're caring for, we also aim for them continue their journey with Jesus. We might do that through saying something explicit, or we might simply continue to hold them up in prayer as Brian Thorne does with his clients, (Thorne p.73) For us, as Christians, person centred pastoring is always engagement with a third person – Jesus.

I've spoken about pastoring, therapists speak of counselling, another word might be caring. Who are you caring for? Remember these five points about Jesus' pastoring: Those three "conditions" Carl Rogers first identified: unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and congruence – that is, being true to yourself and letting the outside reveal at least some of what's on the inside. And at the front, pastoral openness, and at the back, the ability to disengage, to say, **"go in peace."**