

Elizabeth Presbyterian Church
June 13, 2010
Dr. Bruce A. Spear
Luke 7:36-8:3

"The Forgiveness of Sin"

Prayer of Confession - from King David in Psalm 51

O loving and kind God, have mercy. Have pity upon me and take away the awful stain of my transgressions. Oh, wash me, cleanse me from this guilt. Let me be pure again. You deserve honesty from the heart; yes, utter sincerity and truthfulness. Oh, give me this wisdom. Sprinkle me with the cleansing blood, and I shall be clean again. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Create in me a new, clean heart, O God, filled with clean thoughts and right desires. Restore to me again the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you. Then I will sing of your forgiveness, for my lips will be unsealed - oh, how I will praise you.

Words of Assurance - Psalm 32

Leader: "What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What joy when sins are covered over! What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record." My friends, believe the gospel!

People: In Christ we are forgiven!

Luke 7:36-8:3

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. 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. 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.

Now 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."

Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak."

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning toward 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women

who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

This incident in the life of Jesus comes during his traveling ministry which is summarized at the end of our passage with the words, "Jesus went on through cities and villages bringing the good news of the kingdom of God." The twelve were with him, and they were all supported by women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others who were women of means and able to provide food and shelter for this travelling band of disciples and their Lord.

It was as he travelled this way that he encountered messengers from the Roman centurion asking him to heal his son and it was as he travelled from village to village that he came upon the funeral procession outside the town of Nain and raised the widow's only son back to life.

In the story we read today, Jesus has been invited into the house of a Pharisee named Simon. We do not know why Simon invited Jesus to dinner. It was probably out of curiosity to learn more about this person that people called Teacher and Rabbi. Jesus, even though he was comfortable with outcasts like prostitutes and tax collectors, was also open to Pharisees like Simon and Nicodemus even though he considered them out of touch with God's purposes and with Holy Scripture. Jesus is open to dialogue with anyone. He does not have prejudices and restrictions as to the people with whom he will eat and converse.

As they gather for dinner, they are reclining on the floor or on benches set around a table. They prop themselves up on their left elbows and eat with their right hands. As they are eating suddenly they notice that a woman is washing Jesus' feet at the end of the bench with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing them, and anointing them with expensive ointment from an expensive alabaster jar. This is scandalous behavior by a scandalous woman. The woman is a sinner which is a polite word for prostitute. Her tears are a public display of affection for Jesus, letting her hair down is inappropriate behavior in public. In oriental society to this day the full length of a woman's hair is never seen by anyone except her husband. The woman is kissing Jesus' feet which seems to have sexual overtones as seen in the story of Ruth and Boaz where Ruth crept up to his mat and uncovered his feet. She is wasting expensive ointment by anointing his feet.

This is all too much for Simon. He is repulsed by this prostitute in his house and by her scandalous behavior. He has invited Jesus into his house to see what this rabbi is all about, to measure this teacher up against the standard of the Pharisees, against the standard of his own status as a teacher of the law. Some people after he raised the widow's son from death had said Jesus was a prophet. Well, certainly if he was a prophet, he would know how that this woman was a prostitute and that her behavior is scandalous, but since Jesus does nothing about it, he must not even realize what is going on.

Jesus, however, sees into the heart of the woman and refuses to chastise her. He can see that she is full of remorse for her life of sin and that her tears are tears of gratitude for the forgiveness of sin that Jesus has been proclaiming as the good news of the kingdom of God. Even despised tax collectors and sinful women can repent, be forgiven of their sins, and be received as friends of Jesus and friends of God.

Jesus also is aware of what is going on in Simon. And so he poses a question for Simon. He tells him a story about two debtors. One debtor owed the moneylender 1 ½ years' worth of wages, the other only 50 days' worth of wages. Ironically and scandalously, this moneylender forgives each debtor their total debt. They no longer owe him anything. The note of debt is torn up and burned. Then Jesus asks Simon which one would have greater feelings of love for the gracious

moneylender. Simon answers that it would be the one who was forgiven the greater debt.

Jesus then uses this observation to help Simon see himself in an entirely different light. Simon has been measuring himself against Jesus, this popular rabbi. Jesus casts a different comparison. How does Simon measure up against the town prostitute who has experienced the joy of forgiveness.

Simon, in his reticence to acknowledge Jesus as a prophet or even a good rabbi, had held Jesus at arm's length. He had invited Jesus to dinner but purposely not shown him the proper respect of an honored guest. He did not give him water to wash his feet. He did not greet him with a kiss, as is still the custom in the Middle East, nor did he give him oil to anoint his head after the long, dusty journey. What was lacking in Simon's behavior was supplied by the woman as she washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, as she kissed not his cheek in greeting but only his feet, and as she anointed not his head but only his feet with expensive ointment. She has shown him love in all its humility and devotion. Simon has only held Jesus at arm's length and has not truly received him as a guest in his home. Given the high standards of hospitality in the Middle East, it is Simon who has acted scandalously and the woman who has acted honorably. As R Alan Culpepper writes,

Because Simon thought of himself as pious and righteous, he had no idea what it meant to be forgiven and no awareness of his own need for forgiveness. He loved little because he was not willing to receive even a little of God's love. Simon, therefore, represents the position furthest from God. Because Simon did not recognize his need for forgiveness, he excluded himself from God's grace. On the other hand, because the woman knew she was a sinner, she could receive God's forgiveness. Knowing she was a sinner, she could also know what it meant to be forgiven.

If our lives have been changed by an experience of God's grace, we can never get over the fact that we have been forgiven. God's love, experienced in forgiveness, becomes the controlling force in our lives. The gratitude of the forgiven is also the source of new life. Ultimately, that is what salvation is all about. Such gratitude, however, cannot be forced or faked; it requires absolute, transparent humility before God.

And so we are left with the same question of ourselves. Do we think of ourselves as pious and righteous? Are we like the lady who stopped the preacher one day and said, "You know, when I became a Christian, I really didn't have to change very much. I was already pretty good." Or are we aware enough of our shadowy self to wonder how God could ever love us? Do we think we are doing God a favor by coming to church and doing his work, or are we the kind that wonders how God continues to use unreliable and faithless servants like ourselves? Are we the kind who think that people who show emotional expressions of love for Jesus and tears of repentance and gratitude are a little over the top and are probably trying to draw attention to themselves or do we secretly wish that we too could shed tears of genuine repentance and experience spontaneous eruptions of joy and praise in our walks with Jesus.

Are we like Simon who was too good to have sinners around him or sitting next to him in church? If we are truly the light of the world and the salt of the earth, then we will have alcoholics, unwed pregnant women, substance abusers, unfaithful husbands, and reckless juveniles in church on Sunday. Are we ready for the kingdom of God?

Perhaps we should all join together in this prayer adapted from a prayer by Richard Foster.

Gracious Jesus, it is easier for me to approach you with my mind than with my tears. I do not know how to pray from the emotive center of my life or even how to get in touch with that part of me.

Still, I come to you just as I am. I am sorry for my many rejections of your overtures of love. I repent of my callous and insensitive ways. Break my stony heart with the things that break yours. May it be convulsed with the weeping of repentance and overflow with tears of gratitude for your cleansing and renewing love. Amen.