

Third Sunday After Pentecost  
June 10, 2007

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*Scriptures: 2Samuel 11:26-12:10, 12, 13-15; Psalm 32; Galatians 2:15-21;  
Luke 7:36-8:3*

If I had been given the task of selecting texts for Father's Day, these are certainly not the texts that would have come to mind. But there's a saying about playing the hand that's dealt you, so ....

The Gospel text for today is the story of the woman who comes to the house of Simon the Pharisee to wash Jesus' feet. It is a story about forgiveness, on Jesus' part; about self-righteousness on Simon's part, and about gratitude on the woman's part. I never much like it when the woman's tears are portrayed as tears of shame or remorse, and that this bold act of service is somehow a desperate act of repentance, as if she were groveling in hope of being forgiven. That certainly is not what the text says. It's an act of gratitude.

Which sort of makes you wonder what is this woman's story. (Aside from the part we hear implied from the self-righteous Simon). What has been her previous contact with Jesus that motivated her to come? Why was she so determined to do this act of kindness to Jesus? Just think what courage it took to go into Simon's house – knowing that she would be judged.

Something motivated her, some previous encounter with Jesus. Maybe it was somewhere out in the streets of the city, when he treated her with kindness and respect instead of the disdain and cruelty she got from most people. Or maybe she had heard him teaching. Just a short time before this, in Luke, we heard Jesus teaching "Do not judge others" and the part about removing the log from your own eye before you try taking the speck out of the other person's eye. (Which makes it interesting to ponder whether those two might have gone together. There is a tradition in the Jewish religion called "midrash" that would allow spinning those two bits into a whole story. Perhaps another time.)

The point is, whatever it was, there was something that gave her reason to come to Simon's house, where Jesus was, to show her respect, her gratitude. The forgiveness spoken in the presence of her accusers was a gift, of gift of freedom from everything that kept her bound to a past. Jesus' words, "Go in peace" hold the hope that her life was changed by this encounter. How she felt about herself, how she viewed, and was viewed by, those around her. She could hold her head up high – because no matter what any one else thought, her sins were forgiven and she was free to live as a beloved child of God.

It's actually the conversation with the Pharisee that creates the tension in this story. It's Simon the Pharisee who presumes to stand in judgment, of both the woman and of Jesus if you stop to think about it. "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him" With the implied condemnation of anyone who would let themselves be touched by someone like this woman.

And, as so often happens in Luke, Jesus replies with a parable. There were two debtors, one who owed \$5000 and another who owed \$50,000. Both were forgiven their debt.

Who loves more? Who is more grateful? I know if I were forgiven of a \$50,000 debt, I'd be pretty grateful.

The Pharisees can answer the question. But one is left with the impression that they have a hard time getting the point. They just aren't ready to go along with the idea that God is so much kinder, more loving and forgiving than they themselves are willing to be, or than they care that God be. They think they are better than everyone else because they follow all the rules better than everyone else, and they sure don't want to give up on the idea that God loves them more because of it.

All that really means is that they don't get to know the joy of forgiveness because they aren't willing to be humble enough to acknowledge they aren't perfect. It takes humility to own up to the ways in which they fall short or go astray. And it takes owning up to one's sinfulness to be graced with the joy of knowing you are forgiven.

Now, Pharisees are not just a group of people who lived in Jesus' day. The sad fact of the matter is that Pharisees are alive and well. There are some churches that are more like Simon's house than they are the Lord's house, where it takes a lot of courage for a person who may not feel so great about their past even to enter the doors for fear of how they will be treated.

The simple fact of the matter is that sometimes we are the woman, fully aware of our own human sinfulness, and full of gratitude for Jesus' kindness and forgiveness; and sometimes we are more like Simon the Pharisee, unwilling to acknowledge our sin and irritated that God loves and forgives people we'd rather not see be loved or forgiven.

And the usual ending to sermons on this text is something like, "Which one are you?" How big is your debt? How big is your love?" Do you truly get the point that your sins are forgiven? Because they are, that's just how God is, Jesus says so. Call it God's love, call it grace. You don't have to try to earn it, because you can't. It's given freely, it's a gift. God loves you. Period. End of discussion.

Well, actually, that's not the total last end of discussion. Because this text is so often preached as a "which one are you: the grateful forgiven sinner or the ungrateful, self-righteous judge" we forget there is another pretty significant person in this story. And that would be Jesus himself. Are you, at least sometimes, like Jesus, the one who offers, who pronounces, forgiveness?

Because we live in the world with other people who are just as human as we are, chances are pretty darn good that we have been on the receiving end of sinning. And in the process that we have experienced some deep hurt, some profound unmet need. That's the point in the story when we have the opportunity to be like Jesus, to pronounce to another, "Your sins are forgiven."

Maybe it is getting better, but there for a while fathers were really taking it in the shorts. In books, movies, on TV, commentators, everywhere there were folks bemoaning the sorry fathering they had received from their fathers. Their dads had been absent, or alcoholic, or abusive, hyper-critical, or whatever. Since I'm not a father myself, I can't presume to speak for you guys, but it might have seemed to fathers that no matter what they did, it was never going to have been enough.

But the truth is there are an awful lot of dads who are doing a very good job of being fathers to their children; many of them out of their own less-than-wonderful experiences. Out of their own broken-ness they give their children the kind of fathering they themselves never received.

So, not knowing what is the shape of each of your individual stories, today I lift up to you some thoughts for this Father's Day – to give thanks for all that was life-giving from whoever was as father to you, to forgive whatever wasn't ideal either from your father, or in how you fathered, and to remember that there is a love and forgiveness that is greater than all of us, a love and forgiveness that set us free from the past, and bids us, "Go in peace." Thanks be to God. Amen.