

June 12, 2016
4th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
Luke 7:38-50
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Today's theme song is part of an African American spiritual that goes like this: "Not my brother, not my sister but it's me O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer; not my brother not my sister but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer. It's me, it's me O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer. It's me, it's me O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer."

I invite you to imagine this morning that you have accepted the invitation to be a dinner guest at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Like your friend Simon, you have heard much about this man, this Jesus who seems a lot like the earlier prophets in the Jewish tradition. You're delighted that Simon invited you to this dinner party so you can get to meet Jesus, too, and maybe even ask him a few questions.

This much you know about Jesus – he follows the Torah – he knows his Hebrew Scriptures. And the word on the street is that he has the power to heal people – the news is spreading that some people once blind, can now see; those once deaf can now hear; lame ones are up and walking without their canes; even those possessed by demons have been healed, and are now calm and in their right, healthy minds. Jesus has a group that follows him from place to place, an inner circle of sorts, as well as other interested followers. Some are curious about him and some, as if drawn by a magnet, follow and want to hear more of what he has to say. He teaches and speaks from the tradition they've heard before. But somehow it's new, different.

The food for the dinner party looks and smells delicious, and you are famished. The table is set with everything you need – cups, bowls, jugs of wine, savory stew, plates of bread, pillows for reclining as is the custom. After the meal gets underway, you notice that some of the town's poor folks have begun to meander into the house and stand silently along the back far wall. Others just sit on the floor. It is not an uncommon thing - for the poor to come in and wait patiently in the background while the well-off dine, in the hopes that there will be a few scraps left over to eat when the dinner party is over.

You can see that Jesus is attentive and responsive to those of us gathered for dinner. He laughs, listens, and asks questions of the guests. He and Simon seem to be getting along well. In the midst of all the dinner chatter, you notice something you've never seen happen at a dinner party. A woman, one of the ones who was waiting patiently in the back of the room, makes her way over to Jesus and stands behind him. She is crying, tears freely trickling down her cheeks.

She is carrying a small bottle with her, and as she continues to weep, she kneels down behind Jesus at his feet, and starts to pour the liquid from the bottle over Jesus' feet as he reclines there at the table. The liquid is a yellow-gold color, with a light sweet scent that wafts on the slight breeze blowing through the room. She pours it all over his feet, rubbing it into the skin of his feet with her hands. She loosens her hair and begins to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair, wiping and kissing, kissing and wiping his feet.

At that moment, you happen to catch Simon's eye. At first he just looks uncomfortable, but then you can see the redness creeping up from his neck into his face, and a "slow burn" of recognition and repulsion comes over him, as his nose wrinkles and his upper lip slightly curls back in disgust.

You hear Jesus speak directly to your host. "Simon, I have something to say to you". "Teacher, please speak." And Jesus launches into a story. In the story there is a business man who has two debtors owing him money. One owes 50 denarii (\$1,000), the other 500 denarii (\$10,000). Neither of them can pay back the debt, so the creditor cancels both debts. Now which one of those two men do you think loves that creditor more?" asks Jesus.

After a moment's hesitation, you hear Simon reply, "I guess the one who had the greater debt." "You're right", says Jesus.

Up until this point, Jesus has been looking at Simon as he tells the story. But now he turns toward this unknown woman kneeling behind him and looks at her, then continues to speak to Simon. "Do you see her, this woman behind me? When I arrived here for dinner, you did not wash my feet in welcome and hospitality, or greet me with the customary kiss, or anoint my head with oil in blessing. But this woman has done the unthinkable. She has dared to come close to me, and has done all those things a host would do. She has nothing to lose and much to gain. She, with her many sins is forgiven. She has come here to pour out her gratitude and deep love in the best way she knows how. But those who experience little need of forgiveness, show little love". Then, to the woman Jesus says simply, "Your sins are forgiven". Jesus has pronounced what she has already come to know in her heart to be true.

It has been very quiet in the room up until this point, with the tension seeming to grow between Jesus and Simon. And then the murmuring and objections can be heard coming from some of the other guests. "Who does this man think he is, now forgiving sins? ".

Looking at the woman Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

It's a most provocative encounter, isn't it, between Simon, Jesus, and the woman, and the other dinner guests? If you and I had been there, I wonder how we would have responded to this revealing exchange.

Can you recall a time of getting caught up in a self-righteous stance like Simon? You work hard to do things right. Your beliefs are solid. No one can question your character or sincerity. But underneath, there is a veiled looking-down upon someone, the subtle labeling of another person as some category of "less than" – less educated, less wealthy, less attractive, less healthy, less popular, less moral. It is truly a heart problem when we find ourselves in that place of self-righteousness. A sort of spiritual blindness has taken over. Our heart has gotten tied up in knots with our own sense of inadequacy, and we try to cover it up by comparing ourselves to others, judging others. When we focus on the deficiencies of others it means we don't have to face our own places of poverty, bankruptcy, and dis-ease. And if we do admit to having "deficiencies", we try to keep them under wraps and find a way to fix them ourselves, thank you very much. Ah, but when we're fortunate, the wild grace of God breaks through.

The summer after my first year of seminary I completed a unit of clinical pastoral education at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville. Clinical pastoral education (CPE) provides hands-on experiential training in chaplaincy and basic pastoral care. One night I was on call and received a summons from the nursing staff to see a woman who was "anxious". She wasn't in any particular serious physical distress or near death. The nursing staff just thought it would be helpful for someone to sit with her. I found myself thinking, "You called me here just to sit with this lady?" I was new, training to be a pastor you know, and some part of me wanted to swoop in and make everything better, be "Super Chaplain". I'll call the woman Anna. She was probably in her late 60's, breathing shallowly and rapidly. Anna was not able to communicate verbally. I honestly don't remember if I prayed with her or not. I do remember stroking her hair and holding her hand, and her breathing eventually slowed. I sat down by the bed and just sat quietly with her for a while. After a bit of time in that quiet with Anna, I had what I would describe as my first real recognition of what grace is all about. Anna and I were there together, in God's presence, and God loved us just the same, equally, as beloved daughters. I didn't have to do anything. I didn't have to make anything big or important happen. We were there in God's presence just being loved by God. What an intimate and freeing sense I had, and a humbling experience in not being able to do anything, save be present in the moment to God. I didn't and couldn't do anything else. And that was enough.

In Luke's story the woman, this "sinful" woman was well aware of her inadequacies. She didn't hide them, but took them to Jesus – her sins, her failures, her shame, her self-loathing, her isolation and loneliness. It's very possible that she'd had a previous encounter with Jesus, and something about him had moved her, touched her deeply. With Jesus, she could see she didn't have to stay trapped in the past, chained to her inadequacies, shackled by things she'd done wrong and couldn't undo. Jesus saw her in the present moment, right there in front of him and cherishes her. He receives her lavish act of love and devotion. Jesus saw her capacities, knew who she was meant to be. She needed forgiveness. She knew she needed help and accepted that fact. And then she was humble enough to reach out and receive what was being offered to her by Jesus. When such a heavy burden is lifted, one cannot help but be overcome with gratitude and joy, and give one's self in worship to the One who loves, forgives and sets us free to be who we are meant to be.

Jesus pronounced forgiveness, and set her free to turn the page and begin to write the next chapter of her life. Simon and the like would prefer the book to end as they had predicted and expected. As she departed in peace, what she most needed now was to find a community that understood forgiveness, and welcomed all who seek it. A community that could and would celebrate the lost being found, the dead brought back to life.

What if we had been at that dinner party at Simon's house? Would we have been able to recognize and accept the reckless love of God as Jesus pronounced OUR sins forgiven – yours and mine - bidding us then to go in peace? Would we receive forgiveness gratefully, and pour out our hearts in love and worship? And then, would we accept the invitation to become Jesus' disciples – those called to learn and experience for ourselves again and again the boundary breaking love of God that heals and restores, that sets us down in a new and fresh place? Would we know ourselves to be loved and forgiven, and be willing to share that good news with others, just like one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread?

It's that simple. It's that profound. It's grace unbound and unleashed. And it is free to those who simply admit their need of God and say "Yes, I'll have what you're offering Jesus. Thank you."

"Not the stranger, nor my neighbor but it's me O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer.
Not the stranger, nor my neighbor but it's me O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer.
It's me, it's me O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer. It's me, it's me O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer." Amen.