

June 13, 2010

Scripture: Luke 7: 36-8: 3

Sermon: "'Little is Forgiven, Loves Little'"

This is a very familiar story. Each of the Gospels shares this story. For Matthew and Mark, this story is featured during the time of Holy Week, and the significance of the perfume is to prepare Jesus for his burial. In John, the woman's example is reflected later on when Jesus washed the disciple's feet. Each time this story is told in the Gospels, the focus, the crowd, and the objection is a little different. In Matthew and Mark, it is the disciples that complain about the waste of the perfume, for no other use, than to complain, to show that the disciples just don't get it. In John, it is Judas who complains and points out that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor, and we read that really the poor is not what Judas' real concern. His real concern is that he was stealing money from the till and there would be just less money to steal from now.

But in the Gospel of Luke this version is a different. This version of this story, we hear none of these things. The disciples are not mentioned. The cost of the perfume is not mentioned. The timing is different. It is not Holy Week, burial is not on Jesus' mind. Jesus has just begun his ministry and he has done some amazing things. He has healed a servant of a Roman soldier. He has restored life to a young man, giving back a future, giving back possibilities to his mother, a widow.

And now the leaders that be are curious, not in a bad way. Jesus is different. He has done some amazing things and they are wondering "Is this the guy that we have been waiting on?"

And so Luke has the crowd gather at the house of a Pharisee. It is not a huge crowd, a small one, gathered for a dinner party, gathered to talk with this preacher, to find out more about who he really is.

Luke's story is different. the focus is different. The timing is different. The theme of the story is different. The characters are not worried about the cost of the perfume or where the money could have gone. The characters are worried about who is this man.

And as the story unfolds, Luke shows us that the theme of the story is different as well.

No, when Luke tells his version of this story, the theme is not the poor or acts of devotion. The theme is hospitality, table fellowship, quick judgment, forgiveness, gratitude and grace. Most importantly, Luke's focus as he is telling the story is on grace.

As I read over this Scripture and lived with it this week, I wondered which character I related to the most in this story. Simon, the Pharisee, the woman, the crowd sitting around the table, the man in the parable, or the person with the most debt? Which one of these characters could I find myself and relate to their experience with Jesus and with each other?

Unfortunately or fortunately, I haven't decided which, I could find myself a little in each character or should I say, at least hoped I could find myself in each character. Some characters

were easier to see myself in than others. Some characters were easier to relate to than others as I read the story over and over again. I saw myself in Simon. I related to Simon, the man who was searching for answers and invites this preacher to come and talk. I saw myself in Simon, the host, spreading out a feast for his guests. I saw myself in Simon, the man that questioned and was embarrassed, stunned over this woman's behavior. I saw myself in Simon as he made quick judgments about Jesus and the woman and found myself saying, "There are some things that are just not done.

I saw myself relating to the crowd, nameless, faceless, but all the time watching the drama play out before me. "Do you see, that man Jesus, he is welcoming 'that' woman? You know, that woman. I found myself as I was a part of the crowd wondering why she was known as a "woman of the city" and knowing that there had to be a story, and knowing that I wanted, craved to know the back story of how she got the reputation as a "woman of the city". I needed to know the story for background information, I assure you, not because I wanted to know the gossip that may have been circulating around the room when she entered in. I found myself as part of the crowd, watching, waiting, wondering, judging, whispering, and straining to watch the drama unfold before me.

I found myself relating to the people with debt in the parable, thinking of the different kinds of debt, good debt vs bad debt, how much debt we as a nation carry, how the amount of debt seems to have started this crazy economic mess. People, companies, nations, piling up lots of unsecure debt to the point where the question was asked, "How is it going to be paid back?" And after the realization that some of it wasn't, the supposed firm foundation of the economy began to crack and crumble. As I thought about debt, I began to wonder about those people, those countries that will never be out of debt, ever because of the interest rates, the broken system, the cycle that keeps them in poverty. What if someone said to them, "Your debt is forgiven"? What if someone said to them, "Your life has been given back to you?" What if someone said, "Your debt is erased. Don't worry about your house being taken. Don't worry about your children not being able to afford college. Don't worry about wondering where your next meal is coming from because you can't afford groceries. Don't worry about being sick because you can't afford health care. Don't worry. Your life has been given back to you. Go and live life.

What would it be like if someone simply said to all of us, "Your debt is forgiven?" Now I will say that Mike and I don't have a lot of debt but the debt we do have, if someone said, it's gone; I know I would do a happy dance! And I'm sure many of you feel the same way!

A clean slate, a fresh start, no baggage. What a freeing feeling! What an opportunity! What grace! Life would have been given back. Life would have been restored. Life would have been given back. What a gift! We would be free, no interest piling up, no wondering when we would be out of debt, no wondering when life could start again. We would be debt free!

And then this got me thinking as Jesus was talking to Simon, changing the scenario from debt to life experiences, where do I fit in the wider story? I can admit that there have been moments that I am not proud of in my life. Now, granted I think I have lived a pretty good life, trying to do what is right, trying to live out my faith, but...how do those moments in which I know that I failed or didn't do exactly what was hoped compare to other people's moments of

disappointment? On a scale from 1 to 10, would I score a 3 or maybe even a 5 while others would score a 9 or maybe even a 1? And who gets to decide which moments are worse or better than others? And I guess the real question is, do I want to know or think that someone is keeping track, measuring, valuing my acts, my experience, and my life?

And the answer is no. It is enough to know that it is forgiven. It is enough to know that I have been shown and will continue to be shown grace and love. It is enough to know that because of this grace, because of this love that I have experienced that I know that I am free. It is enough or should I say more than enough to know that God first loved me and it is out of this love that I have been changed and called to share this love with all of God's children. It is enough, more than enough to know that I have been embraced, welcomed, loved as a child of God, as simply me.

And once I realized this no so new thought, a thought that I have and sometimes do take for granted that I found myself relating to the woman, forgiven, welcomed, loved, embraced as a child of God.

I realized that this unnamed woman, as gossip swirls around her, as Simon passes judgment on her is not fazed by any of it because she is rejoicing. She has experienced God's grace. She has been welcomed to the table as a person, seen for who she is, not seen for her debt, not seen for her checkered past, not seen as simply "a woman of the city." She is seen as a child of God and out of that freeing, loving opportunity, she acts. She responds to God's outlandish and outrageous hospitality by doing something just as outlandish and outrageous. And she doesn't care what is said, who says, who judges the behavior to be right or wrong. She doesn't care that she wasn't invited to the party. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that she has been forgiven. All that matters is that she is loved. All that matters is that she is seen for who she is: a child of God, precious in his sight, claimed and named as God's Beloved.

She washes her Savior's feet with her tears. She pours perfume on them and dries them with her hair.

She offers true hospitality because Jesus first loved her and sees her for who she is, a child of God, forgiven, loved and free.

And that is Luke's focus of the story! He masterfully crafts a story where we see ourselves in the characters, thinking we know who is in the right and then we find out, that we have become so jaded, so used to hearing, so cynical that we can't see grace right in front of us, we can't experience grace when it is happening right in front of us. Luke wants us to wake up. Luke wants us to stop taking God's grace for granted. Luke wants us to see that thankfully it is not up to you and me who is in and who is out.

Luke wants us to see that God first loved us and sees us for who we are: children of God, precious in his sight, forgiven, loved and free.

Luke wants us to remember that moment, that time when we first experienced God's grace and to always that that life-giving feeling, that life-renewing opportunity be how we value each other.

Luke wants us to remember that moment when we were first forgiven, that moment when we were first welcome, that moment when we were first seen for who we are and live out that as disciples of Christ, live out that as the Body of Christ here on earth.

We are called to share the Good News and see God's children for who they really are: precious in his sight, forgiven, loved and free.

That should always be our focus. That should always be our calling. That should always be the story that we share.

Because we know that we have been forgiven, loved and freed.

May we never take that for granted as we continue our journey through life. Amen.