

Proper 6C – Luke 7.36-50 The Gift of Forgiveness

Bruce Goodrich was being initiated into the cadet corps at Texas A & M University. One night, Bruce was forced to run until he dropped -- but he never got up. Bruce Goodrich died before he even entered college.

A short time after the tragedy, Bruce's father wrote this letter to the administration, faculty, student body, and the corps of cadets: "I would like to take this opportunity to express the appreciation of my family for the great outpouring of concern and sympathy from Texas A & M University and the college community over the loss of our son Bruce. We were

deeply touched by the tribute paid to him in the battalion. We were particularly pleased to note that his Christian witness did not go unnoticed during his brief time on campus."

Mr. Goodrich went on: "I hope it will be some comfort to know that we harbor no ill will in the matter. We know our God makes no mistakes. Bruce had an appointment with his Lord and is now secure in his celestial home. When the question is asked, 'Why did this happen?' perhaps one answer will be, 'So that many will consider where they will spend eternity.'"

The theme of our Gospel reading from Luke is forgiveness. Luke shows that is the very focus of Jesus' ministry on Earth to bring forgiveness. Likewise, any man or woman that believes in Jesus, without regard to origin or reputation, may enjoy the benefit of that forgiveness if they only believe and have faith in him. That this is of such great importance in the life of the Christian cannot be underestimated. Not long before she died in 1988, in a moment of surprising candor in television, Marghanita Laski, one of our best-known secular humanists and novelists, said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to

forgive me." Even so, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says of this penitent woman, "Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." This woman, with her precious gift of ointment, and her tears of joy, was forgiven her sins, and must be remembered by all who hear the proclamation of the Gospel.

Let us consider then this peculiar dinner party in Luke's Gospel. Jesus had been preaching and healing in the northern region of Israel known as the Galilee. Like John the Baptist, Jesus proclamation had been that the Kingdom of God was coming soon, and that all Israel should repent so that they might be forgiven

of their sins. It is this forgiveness of sins, the return from the punishment of exile in Babylon and the crushing rule of foreigners, that the prophets had predicted. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel among the rest, promised that the Messiah would come, he would restore the people to the land, he would bring forgiveness of sins, he would heal their disease, he would take away their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh to love the Lord their God. So it is that Luke tells us that when the men lowered their paralyzed friend through the roof on his pallet that Jesus proclaimed, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” But it was not enough that he forgive sins. No, the

hallmark of the coming Kingdom of God would be that the citizens of that kingdom would forgive one another, even as they had been forgiven. So Jesus says in his Sermon on the Plain, “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High,

for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

So Jesus forgave and expected those who followed him to forgive. But lest you think I make too much of this theme of forgiveness and how it shows him to be the Messiah I proceed to the verses just before our Gospel lesson. There we find that John the Baptist has heard of Jesus’ miraculous ministry as he waits in Herod’s jail. Upon hearing he sends two of his disciples to Jesus who ask him, “Are you he who is to come [that is, the Messiah] or shall we look for another?” In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many

who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Instead of answering their question with words he shows them the signs that the prophets had foretold. The people who sat in darkness would see a great light. The sick would be healed, the exile would end, their sins would be forgiven. Jesus is saying, once again, “Today, scripture is fulfilled in your presence.”

So Jesus ministry was powerful to forgive sins and heal disease. And it was his reputation as the Messiah which garnered the interest of one Simon, a Pharisee, who invited Jesus to dine at his house. There are certain things about this story that may puzzle the western mind. Ancient Eastern hospitality is very different from what we provide our guests and expect from our hosts. Yet, if we do not appreciate the context we cannot understand Jesus' words to Simon the Pharisee and the woman. Though Simon had invited Jesus to dinner, it was not a private dinner or one with an exclusive guest list. Instead, ancient homes were open to the street and people would

regularly drift in and out. This would most certainly be the case with such a famous visitor as Jesus at the table. Additionally, people did not sit in chairs while eating at a table, but instead reclined on couches, propping themselves up on one elbow while eating with the other hand. Their feet pointed back away from the low lying table.

It is within this setting that this woman, a sinner, that is a prostitute, came into Simon's dining room and began to wash Jesus' feet as he reclined at table.

Remember now, why was it that Simon had invited Jesus to dinner. It was because he wanted to see for himself if Jesus was truly the miraculous Messiah he

had heard so much about. He wanted to see if Jesus was as great a prophet as the people had proclaimed him to be. So seeing Jesus allow this prostitute to touch him, Simon decided in his own mind, "If Jesus were really such a great prophet, he would know what kind of woman he was allowing to touch him." Simon believed that the Messiah would come. Simon believed that when the Messiah came he would save the Jews that had been faithful to the Torah. Simon believed that when the Messiah came he would be a great prophet, knowing what sort of people was the right sort. Jesus had not lived up to Simon's Messianic expectations.

But Jesus, knowing Simon's thoughts tells him the parable of the two debtors: one owing the master 20 thousand dollars and the other owing him two thousand dollars. Neither was able to pay their debts and so the master forgave both men their obligations. Which, Jesus asks, would love the master more? The answer is obvious: the one who owed the greater sum of money. Jesus then contrasted Simon with the prostitute, but not in the way that Simon might have liked. When Jesus arrived for dinner Simon never washed Jesus feet, a common courtesy in the ancient world where people walked long distances in sandals. But this prostitute had not ceased to wash Jesus' feet

with her tears and dry them with her own hair. Simon had not given Jesus the common courtesy of a kiss of welcome on both cheeks, something that has long fallen out of use in English and American company, but still in fashion in southern Europe. But this prostitute had not ceased to kiss Jesus feet, the sign of consummate humility and devotion. Simon had not anointed Jesus' head with scented oil, a gentle luxury in a day when bathing with deodorizing soap was unknown. Yet this prostitute had poured magnificently expensive perfumed oil on Jesus' road weary feet. Who loves the master more? She, who had been forgiven much, loved much. He, who had been

forgiven little, loved little. So Jesus concluded the conversation by giving the woman the assurance she had hoped for. He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." And the other guests at the table were scandalized that he could claim to have power to forgive sins.

The scandal to the Jews was that the Messiah had come in this man from Galilee named Jesus of Nazareth. He was doing the things that the Messiah was to do. He was healing and forgiving. But the problem was, he was doing it to the wrong sort of people. He was calling to him the tax-collectors, prostitutes, the poor and the sick. The Pharisees, the

Sadducees, the Chief priests and the powerful were being left out. The Messiah had come, but he didn't look anything like they had expected. The Messiah was in their midst, bringing forgiveness to all who would follow him, but those who rejected him were left standing outside in the cold.

As we meditate upon this passage this morning it is imperative that we realize three things. The first is Jesus' compassion. Here we see in clear focus Jesus' availability and willingness to forgive all those who truly turn unto him. The second is the great joy that comes to the penitent. I say great joy because we so often attribute fear or grief with such public weeping

as this woman displayed. But it is not for torment that this woman sheds tears. This woman wept because she had met Jesus, had heard his invitation to come away from her life of wickedness and follow him. She wept because she knew that he was the one person that could say, "I forgive you." The third point that we must surely recognize is the equally great danger in spiritual pride. Simon had thought that he was the master, doling out rewards to whomever he chose. He was the examiner who would determine whether Jesus was truly the Messiah. Simon was the one who decided that Jesus was not, as a matter of fact, the Messiah because he was forgiving the wrong subset of

Israel. The anointed, long-expected, chosen one was sitting at his table, and in all his pride he had forgotten his manners.

In his book, Lee: The Last Years, Charles Bracelen Flood reports that after the Civil War, Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly cried that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it." It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to

allow them to remain, lest bitterness take root and poison the rest of our life.

As a matter of principle I try to exclude any points of personal privilege from my sermons. I believe that I have a very limited amount of time before you in the pulpit each Sunday. I hope that in my first year you have gained an understanding, and developed some expectation for what I will do in the pulpit. I want to talk about Jesus, and why you need him and his forgiveness. I think that Jesus is important. I don't think I'm that important, and I don't think you are very important compared to Jesus. I think the most important thing is that each one of you follow Jesus

because he is the only way to the Father, and peace in this mortal life.

So having said what I desire most to communicate to you for whatever length of ministry I have in your midst, I must say that this was the hardest sermon to write knowing that most of you are thinking about the meeting that will follow this sermon. What can I say in preparation for that? What is there in this passage from Luke that might speak to the spiritual condition of this St. Andrew's Parish? Perhaps I should ask are you Simon or are you the prostitute? Do you owe 20 thousand dollars or do you owe two thousand dollars?

Do you know the joy of the forgiveness which can only come from Jesus? Have you ever wept over your sins and the release that comes from them when you take Jesus' reconciling word by faith? Is the Church the place where you come to give thanks for that great benefit which we all have received at his hands?

Sadly, much of the talk in the Episcopal Church these days is about ownership. The debate is about control at the level of the national Church all the way down to the level of the pew. I am not condoning sin or heresy. Nevertheless, the Church is not about control. The Church is about thanksgiving – thanksgiving to almighty God that he has forgiven us in the person of

his Son by the power of the Holy Ghost. The Church is about forgiveness. Forgiveness received and forgiveness offered to one another. Jesus said, “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those thing whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those things which we are not worthy to ask,

but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. AMEN.