

Luke 7:36-8:3 – “Friend of Sinners” – June 17, 2007

Do you think he was embarrassed? Simon, that is. Do you think he was embarrassed at being caught by Jesus? I think so. I think he was not only embarrassed, he was entranced at the superb irony of how Jesus caught him, so entranced and amused that he couldn't stop telling the story of how it happened, and that's why we have this story in the gospels. I believe Simon not only got the joke, he got the point, and was both amused and filled with faith as a consequence.

The joke? Well, just as Simon was thinking, “this man cannot be a prophet because he doesn't even know who or more importantly what this woman is”, Jesus, in true prophetic fashion, reveals that he knows what Simon is thinking, and challenges his faith.

But let's back up a bit, and see how the stage was set for this encounter. John the Baptist had heard some rumours about a new prophet and sent a couple of his followers to question Jesus. In reply to their query as to whether he was the “one to come” Jesus gave them a cryptic message to take back to John: “tell him the blind receive their sight, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” Jesus added a warning, “and by the way, blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me!”

Now there were people standing around witnessing this exchange between Jesus and John's disciples, and they must have been standing around like a bunch of rubes with their mouths hanging open. I say that because Jesus lit into them, asking them what they thought they had gone to find when they went to see John in the wilderness. Managing to take a shot at the king and others who live luxuriously in fine palaces, Jesus further declares John to be a prophet. Murmurs of acknowledgment rise in response to Jesus, as the people agreed that indeed God's justice had been shown, as they and even the tax collectors among them were baptized by John.

But even with this affirmation, Jesus shakes his head in frustration as he asks, “to what then will I compare the people of this generation?”, accusing them of not being able to make up their minds. “John came fasting, eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘he's a wacko!’ – the Son of Man has come eating and drinking and you say, ‘look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

Now this is where we entered the story, with one of the Pharisees who heard Jesus asking him to eat with him, and Jesus entering his house and taking his place at the table. Imagine, if you will, Simon's horrified reaction as the “woman of the city” started to paw over Jesus. Horrified, disgusted even, as Jesus allowed himself not only to be touched by a woman, but touched by a woman who clearly and demonstrably would cause Jesus to be declared unclean. How she even got into Simon's house, the house of a Pharisee, let alone into the eating area is another question, but there was no question that Jesus, allowing himself to be touched by her he had allowed himself to be declared ‘off limits’ to all who were pure and righteous.

“How can this man call himself a prophet?”, Simon thinks to himself somewhat smugly. “I thought he was a fraud all along! Surely if he was a prophet he would know who and what kind of woman is touching him – he would surely know that she is a sinner. What a phoney! How can he consider himself to be sacred when he allows himself to be profaned in such a way”

And then in a wonderful turn of ironic humour, Jesus demonstrates his power as a prophet to Simon by showing Simon that he not only knew this woman, he also knew Simon's private thoughts! Jesus presented this Pharisee with a puzzle, a puzzle which Simon – following Pharisaic logic – would have to solve in such a way as to point out to himself that his perspective on sinners was wrong.

Sadly, not only Simon and the other Pharisees of his day came to the wrong conclusions, but the early church fell into the same trap, and so does much of the church today. How much time and energy and passion is burned up and wasted by the faithful and self-righteous grumping about sinners and trying to find more effective ways to exclude them or drive them away? When we draw such a huge distinction between the sacred and the profane, we start to believe that the gap between the two

cannot be bridged. Moreover, we, like the Pharisees, begin to see the profane as some kind of virus, that mere contact with the profane will cause the sacred to be instantly corrupted, moved beyond redemption, made unclean in such a way that only the most painful of groveling can restore the sacredness.

Like most misunderstandings, there is some kernel of truth present. Sometimes contact with the profane does cause those who have lived among the sacred to be drawn in – the most blatant examples seem to be the cases of youth who are raised in strict Christian homes falling prey to the lures offered by drugs and the fast life. Being so isolated from and disconnected with the realities of real life, such youngsters become prime targets for predators.

What is perhaps even more tragic is the way that those who have tripped and fallen will be and are treated by modern-day Pharisees. These Pharisees are those who draw a huge distinction between the sacred and the profane and apply it to separate people into two categories – those with whom we can associate, and those whom we should assign to the dumpsters of life. Many who consider themselves sacred reject the fallen, or at the very least demand that they undergo long and rigorous, if ill-defined, cleansing rituals before they will be allowed, let alone welcomed, into their temples.

But Jesus, with true understanding, even divine insight into what Simon was thinking, challenges him, and us, and such modern-day Pharisees. “I have something to say to you”, he tells Simon, and all like Simon, and proceeds to present a parable that illustrates that forgiveness is greater for those who need greater forgiveness, and the love expressed in return for that forgiveness will indeed be the greater in proportion. But Jesus doesn’t let Simon rest easy with understanding the parable, and doesn’t let us rest easy either, and he explicitly, forcefully, painfully draws the contrast between the woman’s huge response of love and Simon’s somewhat restrained welcome. “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”, Jesus challenges. “You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet”, he accuses. “You did not anoint my head with oil (proclaiming me Messiah) but she has anointed my feet with ointment”, Jesus condemns.

And then Jesus, the true Messiah, the anointed one of God, closes the gap between the sacred and the profane – “your sins are forgiven”, he tells her, and sends her away in peace. “Her sins, that were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” In an act that only the Son of God could perform, Jesus demonstrates to Simon, to the Pharisees of Simon’s day, and to the Pharisees of all time, that he is indeed not only a prophet, fully able to understand who and what kind of people we all are, but the true Messiah, able to reconnect us fully with the sacred. A ‘glutton and a drunkard’ they called him. A ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ they derided, not understanding that because he was, and is, and thank God continues to be the friend of sinners, we sinners have the hope, and promise, and reassurance of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of being welcomed back into the presence of God.

Was Simon embarrassed? I believe so – and he understood the joke was on him. I think he got the point as well, and was dramatically changed by it. Maybe not at that moment, perhaps not until the full impact of Jesus’ resurrection, but I think Simon truly understood that Jesus was not only the Messiah, the Christ, the redeemer, but was more importantly just as people had charged, that Jesus was indeed the friend of sinners, the very ones he came to redeem. I think Simon was the one who told and retold this story, at his own expense, until it became recorded in scripture. Think about it for a moment - who else knew what was going through Simon’s mind? Only Jesus, the prophet, knew what Simon was thinking. Jesus – the friend of sinners, sinners like the woman, sinners like Simon, sinners like you and me. All thanks to God for our redemption in Christ Jesus, our Lord.