

### **“Debts, Trespasses, or Sins” – Luke 7:36-8:3 – June 13, 2010**

Do you think he was embarrassed? Simon, that is. Not Simon Peter, the apostle, but Simon the Pharisee. 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 intrigued 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 got the point, and was filled with faith as a consequence.

The irony? 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 sent a couple of his followers to question Jesus as to whether he was the “one to come”, and 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 – and by the way, blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me!” The people who had witnessed this must have been standing around like a bunch of rubes with their mouths hanging open, because Jesus lit into them, asking them what they thought they had gone to find when they went to see John in the wilderness. Taking a shot at the king and others who live luxuriously in fine palaces, Jesus 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 even the tax collectors were baptized by John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers had rejected God's purpose for themselves, namely repentance and forgiveness.

And now we can almost see Jesus shake his head in frustration as he asks, “to what then will I compare the people of this generation?” Is there no way to please these people? “John came fasting, eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘he's a wacko!’ – but 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!’”

With Jesus' frustration ringing in our ears we enter today's story. One of the Pharisees who heard Jesus asks him to eat with him, and Jesus enters his house and takes 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 not only lets himself be touched by a woman but touched by a woman who clearly and demonstrably would cause Jesus to be declared unclean. Naturally enough the first big question that I ask myself is “how did she even get into Simon's house, the house of a Pharisee, let alone into the eating area?” One answer is that the whole situation is a ‘setup’ by Simon, as under ordinary circumstances she would not have been allowed to cross the threshold of his house – for if she had, his whole house and household would have had to undergo ritual cleansing before a meal could even be prepared, let alone served. Jesus, by allowing himself to be touched by her, 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?”

The problem of how to deal with sin and sinners has been a challenge for people of faith since humanity first became aware of the concept of sin. Ancient tribes wrestled with this issue. Much of the Hebrew scriptures – the ‘Old Testament’ in our terms – is taken up with describing

the struggle of sin and what to do with sinners. The early Christian church also struggled to understand the will of God in this matter, and so does the church of today.

As recently as this past week, people of devout faith gathered together in the highest Court of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, at our General Assembly in Cape Breton, to wrestle with the serious questions that arise in dealing with understanding the relationships between that which is sacred, i.e. set apart for God or connected with God, and that which is profane, that which is set apart from, or disconnected from God. These are serious issues, not to be taken lightly, because our understanding of the difference marks and delineates how we understand we should live in relation to and relationship with God. Passions sometimes run very high at such gatherings because these issues are taken very seriously.

However, there is a huge danger in such seriousness. As the distinction between the sacred and the profane is highlighted we start to believe that the gap between the two cannot be bridged. Like the Pharisees we run the risk of seeing the profane as some kind of virus, that mere contact with a sinner might cause us to be somehow infected or instantly corrupted. There is a fear that by such contact we might be moved beyond redemption, made unclean in such a way that only the most painful of groveling can restore the sacredness.

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. Incidentally, did you know that this parable is one source of a Presbyterian ‘tradition’ of using “debts” and “debtors” in the Lord’s Prayer? More on that in a minute ...

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.

Yes, I believe Simon caught the irony of the situation, and caught the meaning of what Jesus had to say to him, and was dramatically changed by it all. Maybe not at that moment, perhaps not until the full impact of Jesus’ resurrection, but I think Simon truly came to know that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the redeemer. More importantly he came to know that just as people had charged, 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 same Jesus who was – and is – the friend of sinners, sinners like the woman, sinners like Simon, sinners like us.

Now that we too are clear, like Simon, about what Jesus is really saying, let's go back for a moment to the issue of "debts, trespasses, or sins." As I mentioned a few minutes ago, the parable that Jesus used to help Simon understand what was really happening has been used by Presbyterians in a subtle way to avoid the issue of sins and sinners. I'm sure you're familiar with the 'classic' form of the Lord's Prayer that includes, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." 'Trespass' is an ancient, sixteenth-century English word the meaning of which has changed from a general sense of doing wrong to a very specific form of doing wrong by intruding without invitation upon someone else's property. Presbyterians, demonstrating their affinity for and desirous of being seen as biblical scholars, reverted to the Greek and picked up on the images here in the parable of financial debt and repayment by a benefactor, and moved to use the expression "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Apparently part of the confusion arises also from the fact that the same word in Aramaic, a language used by Jesus, means both 'debt' and 'sin.' Sadly, this move to the parable away from what Jesus was using the parable to illustrate also moves us away from the real issue of sins, and sinning, and the grace of God shown by the forgiveness offered in the sacrificial act of Jesus.

A more modern version of the Lord's Prayer is also in use that instead of 'debts' or 'trespasses' speaks directly to what Jesus was highlighting with the forgiveness of the woman in Simon's house. That version uses "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us," a rendering that speaks directly to the grace of God that we experience, and the grace that we are called to show forth in turn. I'm proposing that we move to use this more relevant version of the Lord's Prayer in our worship. Yes – gasp! choke! sputter! – a change to something as sacred as the Lord's Prayer. But I believe a change that brings us back closer to what Jesus was trying to get Simon to understand – that the real issue is not "debts, trespasses, or sins" but the amazing grace of God's love and mercy shown in forgiveness of sins ... hers, and yours, and mine. So please, think about it, pray about it, discuss it with your friends, discuss it with me, and let's see if we can respond like Simon and hear the message of forgiveness in Christ, and tell it every time we meet.