

Luke 7:36-8:3 – “Friend of Sinners” – June 16, 2013

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”, then 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!”

People were standing around witnessing this exchange between Jesus and John's disciples, and they must have been doing so with their mouths hanging open because Jesus tore 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 priests and others who live luxuriously in fine palaces, Jesus further declared John to be a prophet. Murmurs of acknowledgment rose 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 shook his head in frustration as he asked, “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!’”

With Jesus' frustration ringing in our ears we enter today's story. One of the Pharisees by the name of Simon who heard Jesus' response to John, asked Jesus to come and eat with him. Jesus accepted, entering Simon's house and taking his place at the table. Now imagine, if you will, Simon's horrified reaction as the unnamed but clearly identified “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 and even more than 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 – could only solve in such a way as to point out to himself that his perspective on sinners was wrong.

Jesus, with true understanding, even divine insight into what Simon was thinking, challenged him, and challenges us and 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 also 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.

The problem of how to deal with sin and related to sinners is not a new one – it 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 people of devout faith wrestle with these questions, passions often run very high, because these issues are taken very seriously. 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. 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.

That is where Jesus came into the discussion in Simon’s house, and that is where Jesus still comes into the discussion in the church today, reminding us that he is the bridge between God and sinful mankind, the One who provides us with redemption and cleansing from our sins and makes us whole and blameless, saved by our faith, and ready to stand with him before God.

Simon may well have been embarrassed, but I believe he understood the joke was on him and I suspect he 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.

And now it is Jesus who invites us all to come and dine at his table, offering to us redemption and reconciliation and new life. In our faith let us gather at his feet and offer our tribute as she did, and give all thanks to God for our redemption in Christ Jesus, our Lord.