

Pentecost3, Year C
June 13, 2010
Luke 7:36-8:3
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There is an important theological question embedded in today's story of *The Woman, the Pharisee and Jesus*, but it is not the question of whether or not a woman society generally considers to be bad can experience the forgiveness of God. The story itself contains the answer to that question and the answer is emphatically "Yes." Jesus tells this woman, twice identified as "a sinner," that her sins are forgiven and then adds "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." From the point of view of this story Paul Simon was right when he sang so many years ago in the song *Blessed*: "blessed are the penny rookers, cheap hookers, groovy lookers," for that woman very likely qualified on at least one of those counts and probably two.

The important theological question of this story is not about her, it is about the Pharisee, and whether or not a highly respectable and devoutly religious person can ever experience the forgiveness of God, and on this question the story is decidedly ambivalent. This is the question I want to pursue this morning, not simply because the story itself is unclear as to the answer, but because the very simple truth is that all of us here are much more like the Pharisee than the woman, and we like it that way and want things to stay that way, as, I might add, we should.

For regardless of how they are depicted in the pages of our gospels, the Pharisees were devoutly religious people who were mindful of the presence and reality of God, and careful to observe the laws that had been handed on by their tradition. Beyond this they were for the most part better educated and wealthier than most Jews, and highly respected socially. By contrast a woman identified as “a sinner” was very likely a prostitute, respected by no one, not even her customers. Lots of parents in that day raised their children to be Pharisees, and lots of children hoped that they would grow up to be worthy of that designation. No parents worthy of the name, then or now, have ever wanted their daughter to grow up and become “a sinner,” and no little girl playing with her friends in the streets of Bethlehem, Nazareth or Jerusalem then, or Spokane, Pullman, or Omak now has ever aspired to such a role. To repeat the point with emphasis, we are like the Pharisees, and therefore the answer to the question of whether or not that Pharisee can experience forgiveness applies directly to us assembled here today. I believe the answer to that question is “yes”, but arriving at that answer is not so easy as it seems, and the road to it provides some important insights into the nature of spiritual imagination. So think for a moment about that Pharisee and what his essential problem was.

As a religiously observant person this Pharisee would quite naturally have imagined that he was right with God. I say this for two reasons. First, we

have an example of this very attitude in scripture. Paul describes himself as being “blameless” with respect to the Law, a completely righteous person. This has nothing whatever to do with believing himself to be sinless. On the contrary, the Pharisee would have a keen sense of being sinful, and would know exactly what to do about it. Such a person would make the proper offerings, and observe the proper rituals for atonement. The second reason we know that the Pharisee was like this is because we are like this as well. We who are observant have no sense whatsoever that we are sinless. Like the Pharisee we have a pretty clear idea of our sinfulness and know what to do about it. We know how to confess and when to confess, and we know as well how to receive the assurance of the Church that we have been forgiven. We know – in other words - how to get right with God and we do it.

And this of course is the trap into which people like the Pharisee, people like us, tend to fall. Given this as our context it is the most natural thing in the world to imagine that we are in control of this relationship with God. We are the ones who determine whether or not we get forgiven and we are the ones who understand what makes for righteousness. The Church has consistently encouraged us to believe this, and therefore people of our sort tend to begin after a while to think that our life with God happens because we have deserved it, we have earned it. Whatever we have therefore with and in God is ours. Even those who understand that we don’t deserve forgiveness from God, and

can't earn it, find themselves slipping into the belief that this is the right attitude, and because I have the right attitude, because I get it, therefore I become closer to God, and God comes closer to me. So we still get trapped into the sense that life with God is about us acting and God responding.

And that really messes us up. Indeed, this is exactly Paul's point in today's passage from Galatians as he asks us "if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!" We tell ourselves, as that Pharisee told himself, that if I do all the right things, and have all the right attitudes, and understand all the right ideas in the right way, then God will love and forgive me, and then I will be righteous. So in the name of God, in the name of religion, in the name Christ, in the name of justification by faith, we become self made people, owing our redemption not to God, who is merely the instrument, but to ourselves, the creators of our own goodness and the authors of our own salvation, because it is after all our faith which moves God, and our faith which forces God to become merciful and kind.

That is what makes it so hard for good people like me, and like you and like that Pharisee to experience the sense of God's love and mercy and forgiveness at the very deep level the woman in the story experienced it. She knew she had no claim, she knew she had no place to stand before God. She knew that whatever she got from Jesus had nothing whatever to do with her,

and everything to do with Christ's own goodness. And we don't know what she knew because our own sense of who we are as Christians hides us from this truth. Because of that deeply understanding and experiencing the life and love and forgiveness of God is remarkably difficult for us whether we admit that to ourselves or not, and will remain so as long as our spiritual imagination tells us that life with God is all about us, what we do, believe and say. For we will have earned our place and earned our forgiveness, and therefore what we experience is not a sense of forgiveness – regardless of what we call it - but rather reward, the just compensation for our efforts and repentance and new life.

The good news from my perspective is that it doesn't have to be that way. We are not doomed by our own religion to isolation from God. There is in fact nothing inherent in either Judaism or Christianity that forces us into that kind of spiritual position, as attractive as it is. For though we can use religion as a recipe for righteousness, as the means by which we earn our place and stake our claim, we can also realize that this is not the proper use of either Judaism or Christianity. Both religions are in fact at their heart designed to blow up the very notion that we can do this. Both are meant to destroy the idea that any of us have any claim on God whatsoever, and to broadcast and proclaim that God is unconditionally present to us and eternally forgiving of us, even when we distort the ways in which God seeks us.

Our religion can teach us, most simply put, what that woman realized, that our life with God is about God; it emerges from God as a product of God's love and mercy, and has nothing whatever to do with what we deserve or earn. We in fact can do but one thing, which is to say "Thank you" in as many ways as we can in our liturgies and in our lives. When that happens, as that happens, we too can move beyond the sense of being rewarded for what we have earned into that sense of genuine gratitude for the experience of a life lived in the presence of unconditional acceptance. We will know that has happened in our lives not because of any specific, and transient, feeling that we get, whether it be John Wesley's famous "warming of the heart" or some other sensation, but when we discover that our desire is to treat others with the same kind of unconditional regard we have received from life. For that is the true test of gratitude, whether or not we forgive as we have been forgiven, and love as we have been loved. That woman in the story did just that, the Pharisee didn't. The good news for all of us here gathered today is that the Pharisee too is not beyond the scope of God's forgiveness, for the moment he abandons his sense of earned righteousness and deserved forgiveness, he too will be able to experience what she experienced. For that we may all be grateful.