

Luke 7:36-8:3 (NRSV)

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him--that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of

Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember to do something nice for Dad today – this unsolicited testimonial from a pop in the pulpit.

Today's readings seem to me to be about how we learn the nature of God and what God wants from us. Mostly, in fact, they are about learning to do what God wants us to do rather than to do what other people want us to do.

The reading from the Older Testament is fairly straightforward. David has sinned. He has sent Uriah off to battle to die so that he can take his wife, Bathsheba. In fact, the story is even more complicated, because David has had Uriah killed to conceal the fact that Bathsheba is pregnant already pregnant with David's child. How often is it that we make more and worse mistakes by trying to conceal the mistakes we have already made?

Nathan is God's prophet and Nathan needs to bring David to his senses. He does it by telling David a story, the story of a rich man who seizes the ewe lamb of a poor man to feed a guest. This ewe lamb was all the poor man had. It was like a child to the poor man – he had fed it at his table. But the rich man took the lamb and had it butchered to feed one of the rich man's guests. David is filled with outrage toward the rich man in the story. Then Nathan turns the tables on David, telling him that *he* has acted just as the rich man did, seizing the woman who Uriah loved and arranging for Uriah to die in battle.

Is David angry because he is a fundamentally just king? Or is he angry because he knows at some level the way that this story

applies to him? Or both? We don't know – we know that David recognizes his guilt and accepts his punishment.

As I walked with this story, I saw how difficult Nathan's job was. Nathan is caught between David and God. David is his king, but God is his ruler. To obey God he has to rebuke David, but if he is not careful, David will have *Nathan* in the front lines of the next battle.

But David's job is difficult, too. David probably knows he has done wrong but he has compartmentalized it, hidden it from himself. How often do we do the same? His word is law, but he has to learn how to criticize his own behavior from God's point of view.

Nathan uses a story to awaken David's essential justice, the story of a rich and powerful man, a man like a king, who takes a poor man's best-loved possession. Nathan cannot bring David to justice – he is the king. Nathan has to bring David to *himself*. And he does it with a story, a parable that tells David that the evil that he rightly abhors came from inside himself.

Jesus does the same thing to the Pharisee, Simon, in the Gospel reading. You may recall that we had another version of this story, the one from John's Gospel, as our Gospel lesson just a few months ago. And even though that one had similar elements, the overall effect is very different. In that story, Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet with perfume and her tears and dries his feet with her hair. Perhaps it is because we think we know Mary, perhaps because of the way the story is told, the effect is very different.

The woman in today's story is not named. We know she has a bad reputation, that she's the sort of person you wouldn't want to be seen with, the sort of person you wouldn't want everyone to

know that you knew. We've all known someone like this –at some time or another, we may have befriended someone who our parents might not have approved of.

Now, I want to be careful in this, especially for young people in the congregation. Your parents have very good reasons why they may not want you to have certain friends and I would encourage you to respect their wishes. People in parables are not guides for your behavior – usually they are part of illustrations intended to prove a point.

The woman in the story makes such a strong impression that we forget that this is not really a story about her as much as it is about the Pharisee, Simon. Note how cleverly the story is introduced – the story begins, “One of the Pharisees . . .” and only later is the woman introduced. Luke even lets us see events from the Pharisee’s point of view. Luke tells us that Simon says to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.” Now, can’t you imagine saying the same thing? Jesus, who Simon knows as a teacher and a prophet, is letting this obviously unsavory, impure woman touch him, kiss his feet. Jesus doesn’t even seem uncomfortable. What can he be thinking of?

So Jesus tells Simon a story, just as Nathan told David a story. A lender has two debtors. The lender forgives them both because neither can pay up, even though one owes only 50 days’ wages while the other owes 500. Jesus even allows Simon to condemn himself – he asks Simon to decide who would love the lender more? Simon says, the one who has been forgiven more.

Well, then, says Jesus, here you are, the host, in a position in which you should be offering me hospitality. But you haven’t washed my feet, which a hospitable host should do. You haven’t welcomed me with a kiss, as a hospitable host should do. And you

haven't anointed my head with oil, which a hospitable host should do. But this woman *of whom you disapprove* has done what you should have done – she has washed my feet and anointed them and hasn't stopped kissing me. Jesus tells Simon, just as Nathan told David, the sin that you abhor is actually in *you*.

The story ends before we discover how Simon reacts. Does he admit the essential justice of what Jesus has said? Does he recognize his own lack of hospitality? Can he see how his own sense of righteousness gets in the way of his reconciliation? We don't know. But, rather than simply dismissing this story as “another bad Pharisee” story, we can take it as a teaching moment where a sinner is told a story involving someone else's sin and asked for a judgment about it. When this happens, the person judges him- or herself.

This is why Jesus uses stories so frequently, why the Bible uses stories so frequently. When we are accused, we immediately defend ourselves. But when we are told a story and asked to reflect on it, our defenses are lowered. And if we make a practice of this kind of reasoning, we develop a self-reflectiveness that allows us to judge ourselves and allows us to monitor our own behavior, a thing that we see David, beloved of God, was not very good at. But the other thing that happens is that an abstract principle takes on a human face, the face of a poor man with only one ewe lamb, or the face of a woman with a bad reputation but a great love for Jesus. And when that happens, the way we make moral judgments changes.

Let me tell you a story. A couple of weeks ago, Judy Coyle who organizes the Relay for Life for Calvert County asked me if I would offer the blessing to open the relay. I agreed – I thought it would be good to participate in community events like this one, though I hadn't been to Relay for Life before. So I went, thinking to add a bit of worship to the occasion. But when I got there, I saw

that it was *all about* worship – all about the celebration of life, about courage and humility and living for others. I saw a father with his son who has an osteosarcoma and the son gave a wonderful talk that ended with this quote from Margaret Mead that I'm sure you've heard – “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” I would only add, “with God's help.” But I felt a little ashamed that we weren't part of Relay for Life and I know that next year I want us to be. I came to this expecting to teach and wound up learning about how to do ministry. That's the way things happen in the Kingdom of God.

Simon didn't know what he was getting into when he invited Jesus to dinner. He probably didn't expect to be taught a lesson about hospitality from a woman with a bad reputation. We don't always know what we're getting into when we let Jesus into our lives. We'd like to learn easy ways to judge other people's behavior, but more often than not, we wind up looking more closely in the mirror instead. But that is how we learn to be truly human.

Amen.