

Grace and Gratitude

sermon digest

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Luke 7:36-50; Galatians 2:15-21

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The Gospel passage that was read this morning is one of interest to me because of the questions it raises about our common ideas of forgiveness and grace. For years, while I worked at Habitat, I cannot tell you the number of times a week I would hear from someone the statement of “I pulled myself up by my bootstraps so I cannot see why others don’t do that, too.” Their comments alluded to the idea their situations were just as bad as the families we were trying to assist today. While I cannot speak to the exact equality of those situations nor compare them to each other, the comments indicate an ideology that is rampant. That is that we are not equal and that some people are “different” from others and by this we mean to intimate that we are better than them. It is not my intent to take this sermon down the road of explaining the situation of poverty that is running rampant today and yes, I could pretty easily give you data proving that those in dire poverty today are having a more difficult time of it than those decades earlier because of how their opportunities for progressing have dried up, but that is not my sermon for today. I am more interested in the thoughts that you and I have when we look at others. What do we see; what do we think; and more importantly, how do we react?

In our current society, we have a tendency to think of ourselves better than others. We all do it. We have an ingrained sense of prejudice toward ourselves, our family and those like us. I was listening to a news report Saturday morning on job interviewing skills. It was suggesting that one should not go to a face-to-face interview first because those hiring are far more likely to try to hire a person who is like them above those who are most qualified or would do the best job. They suggested several things that should come first – questionnaires, surveys, tests, etc., all that are given to the entire qualified pool - so that those that rise to the top are the ones that could truly fit the position for the right reasons and not because of the prejudice of the hiring person.

That said, and while I agree that we all do it, the question should be asked of Why do we do this? Sociologists have several opinions gathered from various studies. We don’t like tension or conflict so we tend to stay close to those who are similar to us. They are familiar, they share our opinions or belief systems. They probably have similar education or experiences as we do or have experience some of the same situations that we have. We have a common bond and because of this, we stay close because of the comfort it gives us when with them.

We are also an inherently lazy bunch of creatures. Our default is to stay with what we know because learning something new takes effort and energy. We don’t like change. We prefer for things to stay as they are so that we do not have to adapt. We feel that same way about people. If we step out to increase our circle of friends, we have to make ourselves vulnerable and we risk being unacceptable to others. Or, if we truly take on the new ideas and opinions of others, we will be faced with what we should do about this new information or person. How will we integrate it into our life, our beliefs and our actions? It may cause us to be compelled to do something out of our comfort zone and we are hesitant to do that.

The other issue, the one that is more to the point for today’s lesson is that we don’t perceive ourselves as sinners, or at least if we do, we are not as bad as others are. WE may do this, but we surely don’t do THAT which is much worse.

The passage today drops us into a situation where this is exactly what we have going on. Simon, a noted Pharisee of the day, has invited the itinerant preacher to his house for more conversation. In the early days of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus was not at odds yet with the Pharisees and they found him to give them a bit of intellectual challenge – a religious sparring partner if you will, and they would have him over for a meal if the opportunity arose. However, even though Jesus had been the recipient of the common people’s respect and credence as a great teacher by the fact that throngs would come out to hear him wherever he went, Simon’s opinion of Jesus was somewhat evident by the fact that the normal hospitality and social graces that one would extend to a guest, were not extended to Jesus. Usually, a dinner of this sort would be held in the large open courtyard of a Middle-Eastern home. As the diners of note would enter, they would be treated to having their feet washed to remove the road dust from them. They would be offered and treated to scented oils for their head and body – something that was a sign of hospitality but it also made sitting next to other only periodically-bathed people more bearable at a close encounter such as a meal, and they would have been shown respect and concern by the host for their attendance with the greeting complete with a kiss. Apparently, none of these points of hospitality had been shown to Jesus by Simon’s household.

As was also a common occurrence, since the meal was held in the courtyard, others not invited to dine would gather around the walls to watch and listen. For a woman to enter and stand behind Jesus would not be necessarily noticed. What brought attention to her was her actions of humility and love toward him. As Jesus was reclining and resting on his elbows, his feet were stretched out behind him. This woman unnamed in this version, but generally considered to be Mary Magdalene from all the versions of the story found in the other Gospels, begins to weep and as she does, her tears fall onto Jesus’ feet. With no other recourse, she stoops to dry them with what she had available, her hair. What a soft, gentle and pleasant feeling that must have been for Jesus’ compared to the lack of hospitality he had been shown by others. Then, she proceeded to anoint his tired, road-

weary feet with expensive oil, again a sign of her complete humility and one of love toward this One sent from God.

Jesus apparently didn't pull back from the gesture but let it continue understanding the attitude with which the gesture was given – that of gratitude. Simon on the other hand was more concerned that this woman was “touching” Jesus. This woman seemed to be one who was recognized and known, if not named, and it seems that she was given the reputation of that of a prostitute. At the very best, she was considered ceremonially unclean. How could Jesus allow such a thing? While the passage tells us that Simon was not actually speaking out loud his disdain for the woman and the situation, it apparently could be surmised by those around him. This is not a hard one to believe. Does your partner really have to speak their disapproval or dislike for something? Cannot you tell their opinion from their body language, their facial expressions and yes, their sighs, gasps and grunts? This was probably Simon. Jesus responded to him with a parable.

Jesus' parable to Simon about the two debtors has two perspectives. One is from the point of view of the Debtors – there were two who had debts. One owed a lot, about 500 day's wages and one owe a lesser amount – about 50 day's wages. One amount had the possibility of maybe being able to be paid back over time surely making this the better person of the two. The other was almost more than a person could fathom. It was beyond the idea of being paid back making this debtor the worst of the two – the scoundrel, the unreachable, the unredeemable..

The other perspective is that from the one to whom the debt is owed - the Heavenly Father's perspective. Both of these debtors owed money. Both could not pay. Neither had the ability to repay over time. It was not about the amount they owed, but about their inability to repay the debt. Both were equal in that they could not do it on their own. They were both in need to grace. They both needed forgiveness of the debt. Unlike our society in which everything is subjective and relative, the day of this story was not. We tend to think of our debts or sins as relative. I only did this or these small things, unlike that person who did THAT or THOSE kinds of things. Things were more black and white then. If you owed a debt, any debt, you were a debtor and if you could not pay, into prison you went until someone paid the debt for you, usually your family. If no one paid, you stayed there indefinitely. Granted, you had a better chance of coming out at some point if the debt was small, but even so, a debtor was a debtor.

When Jesus asked Simon which of the debtors would show their love and gratitude more, he replied that it would probably be the one for whom the most was forgiven. He seemed to understand the correlation and the meaning but Jesus didn't stop there. He proceeded to tell the woman that her sins were forgiven, a statement that got the other listeners, guests and Pharisees attention. How could anyone but God forgive sins? Was this prophet claiming he was God or equal to God? How could this be?

Before they could get satisfaction, Jesus proceeded to tell the woman that her faith had saved her and to Go in Peace. Leaving the Pharisees in a conundrum that will eventually come back to haunt him through their anger and animosity, Jesus focuses instead on the woman and gives us a lesson in how we are to think of ourselves and others. As in the parable, we are all debtors unable to pay back the debt we owe. We are all in need of the grace that only God can give. There is no difference in the level or amount of grace needed. There is no difference in the amount of or kind of sins committed that got us to this place. The bottom line is that we all are in need of grace. Paul states it succinctly in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” However, that said, Jesus did not treat this woman any differently than he did anyone else, even Simon. He showed no partiality or deference to the Simon even though he was the host of the event. What he did notice and call attention to was the actions of love demonstrated toward him – in essence the level of gratitude shown.

Most of you know that I am a cat lover. Having three cat-children living with us is about all we can handle but when stray kitties have been thrown out to fend for themselves, it seems they inevitably find their way to our doorstep. Due to the antics of particularly social male cat that was abandoned when his owners moved from their apartment across the street over a year ago, we have two generations of mothers and this spring has been literally littered with litters of kittens. I have raised one and gotten all of them given away and am now in the process of completing the process to a second litter of 4 little males. The other litters are not as social...yet. Whenever I go outside, I look like the Pied Piper for cats with 4 kittens and 6 adults currently following me around. This is the usual behavior in the morning and evening when I have come out to feed them. In the mornings, I usually see Mike as he is leaving for work and he just waves and chuckles at the sight. As I make my way around, I have a hard time walking because of the cats trying to rub on my legs as I do. They weave in and around, meowing, and looking up at me. When I stand still, they just rub and rub and purr. Yesterday as I was thinking about the sermon, I was experiencing their intense kitty massage and thought about why they do it. They are showing their appreciation, their gratitude. They know their situation – some were once indoor cats well taken care of and now they find themselves out fending for themselves. They are extremely appreciative of the gift of a regular and dependable meal. My indoor cats while extremely loving, are not nearly so appreciative for they have come to expect a meal at a certain time. They even are demanding of it if for some reason we have gotten off

schedule a bit and God forbid! missed their feeding time. They appreciate it but not nearly as much so as the outdoor children.

This woman unashamedly showed her gratitude. She was so very appreciative of the new life of grace she had been given. It motivated her to action, to be demonstrative with it. But Jesus was careful not to let the situation become misinterpreted. When he told her that her sins were forgiven, it was not a proclamation of something yet to happen, but rather a declarative statement indicating that that her sins HAD already been forgiven, as in past tense. He then went to state that it was her faith that had saved her. Her faith brought about her understanding of her condition. God's grace was available to her and she accepted it by faith thus her sins were forgiven. It was not something that she had worked for to make happen. She had not made herself lowly and washed Jesus' feet with her tears in order to gain forgiveness. It was hers freely given and she did these things as means of showing her gratitude. Grace is not something to be earned. It doesn't come to us because of who we are or our state in life. As the Galatians passage we read explains. Grace does not come to us because we are Jews or Gentiles, Americans, or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, young or older. It is God's gift to us that is available through faith.

Lastly, she was told to ***go in peace***. Don't just stay here and bask in your forgiveness, "Go". Do something about it. Show that you are forgiven by, from this point forward, living life differently than you did before. If this truly was Mary Magdalene as scholars think, we find two verses later that she joined the band of followers who traveled with Jesus and took on a major role of sustaining the vision and mission. She and two other women used their financial resources to support the work and ministry of Jesus. She put her forgiveness and her resources into action.

That is where we find ourselves today. We can easily find ourselves in this story and especially in the parable. We are all debtors, no matter the amount, size or magnitude. We are all in need of grace and forgiveness of our debt. Because we have faith in Christ, we have the opportunity offered to us by God for that forgiveness needed, all we have to do is to accept the forgiveness. And we do. We rejoice in it and relish the relationship with God that our forgiveness offers us. But there is more to it.

Just as Jesus told the woman to Go in peace, so should we. Because of the wondrous grace given us, let us live out our gratitude in service to others. Let us show through our lives that we understand our situation and our daily need of grace and use every opportunity to show God's love to others. Let us be instruments of God's peace to a warring and fractured world. We should not only be those that meet needs when we see them, we must be those who seek out the needs to be met. Let ours be the hands through which God's grace and mercy is offered to all. Amen.