

Sermon – Pentecost – 3  
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You've probably been to a party in the neighborhood...held in the early summer. Not too hot, not too cold, it's in the back yard. The garden is meticulously tended and in full bloom. The Tables are resplendent with food, on lovely matching dishes, that are complemented table cloths...even the lime wedges have their own dish! Everything has been thought out, from the drinks to the glasses they will be served in ...but something very important and necessary is missing...like... enough toilet paper in the bathroom, or soap at the sink.

It is to such an occasion that Jesus is invited by a man names Simon. A Pharisee, one who kept the Law and one who taught it. And, we are told by the commentators that this dinner that that Jesus was attending was probably similar to the Greco-Roman symposia of the day, where a group gathered for a meal and a debate about philosophy...or in this case, about theology.

And it is into this dinner party that one who doesn't belong enters. A women who's name in not recorded in the scripture. If this were our Lakeview Dinner it would be a person who DID-NOT fit in. She's not appropriately attired, she is acting VERY strangely, she makes the guests very uncomfortable and the host incredulous.

At Simon's party, she doesn't belong because, she is a woman. A gathering of Pharisees would not include women because they were not permitted to discuss the law. Second she is known in the vicinity as a "Woman of the City" in other words; a prostitute. It is an interesting title that Luke gives as it is assumed that Jesus is still in the town of Nain, where he healed the widow's son. Nan is no city, but "Woman of the Town" or "Village" doesn't have the same gravitas.

As this drama, it is through the incredulous host of this meal, Simon, we find out a bit about this woman's history and what motives are behind Simon's throwing of this dinner party.

The text reveals to us that Simon was not only incredulous towards this unwelcome woman but also towards Jesus. - If Jesus *Was* a prophet then he would know who and what type of woman this was ...she is a "Woman of the city" now how Simon knew that she was a "Woman of the city" is for another sermon...but his ire is focused as much on Jesus as it is on the woman making a spectacle of herself at Jesus' feet.

Just a few verses before these, we heard that Jesus healed the son of the Widow of Nain. For this the crowd gave thanks to God for a prophet in their midst. Then, in the same local, (though not included in our reading last-week or this) is the story of John the Baptist's disciple seeking after Jesus. In this discourse Jesus speaks of John as the greatest of the prophets and that the Scriptures foretold he would herald the Messiah, then there is a couched reference that Jesus makes to himself as the "Least Citizen" of heaven being greater than John. So here we have the context. Simon invites Jesus, proclaimed

as prophet, to this dinner/symposium - not in thanks giving for the prophet in his midst but rather to show that he is not a prophet.

But Jesus is a prophet and more. He shows this to Simon, addressing Simon directly and making it known that though he finds this woman's actions abhorrent, unseemly and scandalous... are in reality, beautiful.

Simon, in seeing this woman sees one who is deficient. A sinner separated out from the community and separated from God. A being less than human. Jesus through points out to Simon that he is deficient – a sinner – as well. Doing so with a story about two debtors.

Now this is for me where I can best access the story. I know debt...and I believe most people understand being in debt. And if you're not in debt ...I'd like to shake your hand. For being in debt is all-pervasive in our culture. We're in debt to the bank for our house, our car, our education, our children's education. In debt to the hospital, the doctor, the dentist, a family member, to our parents, to God. And then there is the debt of social obligation. When invited to a party, we are in debt to the host in some way...be it to, bring a lovely hostess gift (my personal favorite) or by invite her/him to a party we throw, or at least by sending a thank-you card. We know what debt is and so does Simon.

In the story Jesus tell Simon, there are two debtors one who owes a great sum then the other. Both their debts are forgiven, and Simon is asked who of the two would be more grateful for the write-off of their debt? Simon answers correctly..."the one with the greater debt." And...like King David in our first lesson, who responded to Nathan's story with righteous indignation...the answer convicts.

Simon's answer convicts him of not being very grateful. Jesus point to the woman who continued to weep, kiss and give thanks. "She has done a beautiful thing to me" He says. You, Simon didn't offer the basic courtesy, no water, no oil, no kiss of peace...yet she has done all these and continues to do them. Jesus says that her sins which were many are forgiven.

What this discourse with Simon has shown is that he is not lacking in sin and in fact... his hard heart towards Jesus and toward this woman whom he sees as only deficient, one of them. Jesus also discloses that this un-named woman in no longer an object of scorn who bears deficiency, she is a redeemed sister, a daughter of beloved of God filled with hope and with great possibility.

And the story ends here... with a delicious ambiguity. Jesus sends the woman off with an assurance that she is saved by her faith (in God's forgiveness) and is to go in peace. And Simon who has been publically humiliated is left to carry on with Jesus in his midst. Oh the possibility!

For Simon, there may be conversion or not.  
Continued acceptance in the cohort of Pharisees or not.

For the un-named woman, where is she to go? As a “Woman of the City” a prostitute she has few choices. Women didn’t (nor do they today) become prostitutes because it is a desirable option for employment. In the first century Palestine, a woman was forced into this line of work because of societal constraints. She was either widowed without children, or orphaned with no siblings to care for her or cast out of her supporting family for any number of reasons. Not permitted to work apart from family...her community was, more than likely, with those who, like her...out-casts...permitted to operate on the fringe of society, with little or no recourse but to sell their bodies as the only commodity they had.

It is to this community that she returns. But she returns changed, forgiven, with peace and hope. Fred Craddock theologian and Biblical scholar says of this woman that “perhaps she has brought the good news that one like her...all like her could be forgiven and made whole.” Craddock says that this story screams for the creation of a church...and not just any church...but one that says -‘You are welcome here ‘..” Scandalous, provocative and just maybe... exemplary.

And Luke tells us, after the bickering of some more Pharisees, that a community rose up and followed Jesus, composed of the twelve and a number of women who supported his ministry. Quite a paradigm ship for the day and perhaps it is to this new community that the un-named women joined.

Now to another woman for a moment. This woman has a name, Bathsheba. Wife of Uriah Hittite; whom David had killed in order to hide the affair and subsequent pregnancy that ensued with his wife. We hear that after her period of mourning, David took Bathsheba as his wife and all was well...as far as David was concerned. But Nathan the prophet makes it known to David that he has sinned greatly in God’s sight and that part of the price David will pay is the death of his son. Our pericope ended today with the words: “And the child became very ill.” And, as is our tradition, we close the reading with “the Word of the Lord”...and I can almost hear a bit of a gasp as we respond... “Thanks be to God.” The question that hangs heavy in the air is: “Why are we saying Thanks be to God for God’s taking of a child in retribution...and what of Bathsheba?”

She has, had been and continues to be the pawn of power...king and Creator. Her grief must be inconsolable as it is with any mother who loses a child...and made all the more...as God is involved.

This week a colleague in ministry shared that a member of her community had lost a child...still born...and how irreconcilable such a loss was...leaving her and her community to surround and support in the hope that in with and through their presence Christ would be known.

But what of Bathsheba? She is left in this Theodicy (when bad things happen to Good people/make sense if the senseless) that makes no sense.. a Theodicy that confounds her and confounds us. We do read in the verses following our pericope that after her child

died, that David did seek to console her and that eventually they were reconciled enough that they brought forth another Child who was to be named Solomon....though it still seems that Bathsheba is a pawn to power.

For this pastor, who sees everything through the lens of Jesus, who I understand as “God with us” I cannot comprehend a God who takes the life of a child...I can however comprehend a prophet who would interpret God as taking the life of a child. So I leave it there.. in the hope that Bathsheba was to know God as more than the construct disclosed by the prophet.

And now to us. We are a community, gathered round Word and Sacrament who have come to know the mercy, grace and forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus. We have been forgiven much... what now will be our response? As we gather in this place where we are promised an encounter with the Almighty in Word and Sacrament...will our greeting and worship of Christ be lavish and whole hearted or will it be tepid and lacking in sincerity? As we gather and interact with those who have lost much and are inconsolable... how will we sit with them? With an attitude tempered by surety of what is right and wrong or an unsurely tempered by Grace?

As we return from this place of worship and community into the other communities where we live, work, associate and play... will we do so bearing the grace and salvation given to us and risk sharing it ...possibly in unseemly ways... with those who might need to hear of the one who forgives, heals, restores? And what of our attitude when someone comes into our midst, having experienced God’s salvation and is seeking a place to offer thanks and worship... how will we receive them when they don’t conform to patterns of worship outlined in the Evangelical Lutheran Book of Worship? Will it be with a hard heart and a cold shoulder or with hearts made soft because we too have been forgiven much? I think you know the right answer, as I do.... May it be so.