

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Pentecost June 17 2007 Yr C  
I kings 21:1-121, Psalm 5:1-8, Galatians 2:15-21, Luke 7:136-8:3  
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"One who is forgiven little, loves little"

In 1908, at an Episcopal church in Boston, there began a treatment program for people who suffered from what was then called, "functional nervous disorder". Two medical doctors and an Episcopal the priest began and ran this program. Reports of this program were sent regularly to General Convention and one of the results was a new liturgical action known as the rite of confession added to the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. This was revised in 1976 into two forms of confession.

Some thirty years after this treatment program began, its simple fourfold format, to find a power greater than oneself, go to confession, remoralize one's life and reach out to others, was incorporated into what became Alcoholics Anonymous. Confession, it was believed, is good for the soul. In the 70's it was often jokingly said that Roman Catholics went to confession while Protestants went to psychologists. There is, however, a grain of truth in this in that therapists often hear better confessions because what is shared with them are issues which the individual believes is keeping them from living a more full life. The twelve-step program calls it taking a moral inventory of oneself and then sharing this with another human being.

Therapists and those who work a Program of Recovery have known for some time that there are those, like Simon the Pharisee in this morning's gospel story, who do not or cannot acknowledge any personal faults. There are individuals who when asked what is their greatest weakness have to think about it for a while. The implication of this is that they consider

themselves to be perfect, that they do not have weaknesses, faults, defects of character, whatever one wants to call them. People who do not make mistakes do not experience a need for forgiveness.

From the point of view of Jesus, then, this translates into *one who is forgiven little, loves little*. Does this then mean that if one does not need forgiveness that they are exempt from the Great Commandment to love God and their neighbor? Could it mean that they think they don't need forgiveness? On the other hand, there are those who believe they are so bad that God could never forgive them for what they've done.

What we have here then is two sides of the same coin; one person thinks that they are so good they don't need forgiveness and the other thinking they are so bad they don't deserve forgiveness. What they share in common is the sin of Pride since they both exclude God. It is this form of selfishness that makes us incapable of loving. Our pride, our selfishness, blinds us to our weakness making us judge ourselves to be so bad that in either case God is left out of the picture.

Today's gospel story, today's Good News, is that it is not only about sin but also about the grace and forgiveness of God. Simon invited Jesus to a meal. Normal hospitality would be to greet the guest at the door with a kiss, offer them water for their dusty feet and oil. Our tradition is to greet the person with a hug or a handshake, offer them a chair and a refreshment, coffee, tea, wine etc. Simon did none of these things.

A woman came to Simon's house, came in and sat at the feet of Jesus. Apparently she knew of Jesus, knew of his healing powers, his tendency to forgive people, his love for those who did not live up to the moral standards

set by the Pharisees. This Jesus of Nazareth was different from the other Pharisees who emphasized the law and punishment rather than love for forgiveness. It's not unreasonable to think that she may have known where Simon lived because he was one of her clients, if, as many believe, she make her living being a prostitute.

From Simon's point of view, she was a person who did not live up to his Pharisaical legalistic standards and therefore she was a sinner. Simon is not unlike the Pharisee that Jesus talked about in this parable: *Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people --robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'* "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" *"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Simon said, apparently audible enough for Jesus to hear him, *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.* In other words, he was not only judging the woman but also Jesus. In response, Jesus acted like a good rabbi, he told a story. Like most good rabbinical stories, it was short and to the point and had a moral. *A man had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts of both of them. Now which one will love him more?* Normally those in

debt would be placed in prison till the debt was paid. This debt, fifty or five hundred denarii was a considerable sum of money that was written off.

Forgiveness means to "let go." To forgive ourselves is to let go of that which is crippling us from being truly loving persons. Anger and resentments toward a particular person, place or thing, will eat us up and even though we try to be loving in other aspects of our lives, the reality is that these negative emotions are eating at our insides while we ignore their presence.

To become free is to forgive ourselves and others and let go so that we are free to love. To make the point of the necessity of letting go in order to be free, some therapists have their client stand up while holding onto the chair on which he or she is sitting. Then the client is invited to give a hug to another person without letting go of the chair. It's impossible. So too is it impossible to be truly loving if we are harboring resentments, grudges against another person. Those who are members of hate groups can appear to be loving and kind to those who think and act like them, but the reality is that their hearts are filled with hate and resentments and it spews out in many directions.

Forgiveness means I will not allow myself, the other person or their sin to be an obstacle to my ability to love myself or them. Jesus loved. Jesus became angry with issues of injustice. Jesus responded when challenged about his authority and his abilities. He never responded with hate. He responded with love and truth. Jesus walked the earth free of the negativity that many of us experience and work at eliminating from our personality.

There is documented evidence of individuals growing up in unhealthy and destructive family situations who walk away from it without hate or anger. Somewhere deep inside them they resisted the negativity they experienced and responded with love and kindness. Jesus saw first hand the destructive power of hatred between tribes and races; between occupying forces and the occupied people, between those who hold themselves to be superior to others and those who are cast out and cast aside because they are different.

For Jesus, to treat another human being as less than an equal is not kingdom behavior. To be in the kingdom of God is to treat everyone as brother and sister, to treat everyone as a child of God. Jesus set the example and our baptismal covenant reminds us of our commitment to imitate Jesus in striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being.