

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

June 17 2007, YEAR C

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Having the privilege of working at Share & Care for nearly 19 years, I've also had the privilege to experience stories much the same as we heard today in the Gospel of Luke. There've been lots of PHARISEES over the years...lots of SIMONS...male and female...young and old...myself, included. I think it's safe to compare the actions of today's Pharisee to the actions of so MANY people...probably, in fact, MOST people...as we all go about our private lives feeling pretty settled and safe in our jobs...our families...and our personal religious beliefs.

I can't tell you how many people come to volunteer in our building...truly believing that they are helping the "poor people". Helping bring others to God...by pointing out the "sins" of those "poor people"...renting movies...owning cell phones...smoking cigarettes...driving decent cars...ALL THE WHILE feeling pretty secure that THEIR OWN lives are so much better than the "poor people" they're working with...

And...I'm talking about ALL the different denominations that work there...NOT just the more fundamental folks that we all know and love! In fact, I would venture to say that each of us in this room today...has looked at someone in different clothes...weird hairdo's...not-so-white skin...dirty faces...and made instant judgment before we even realized what we were doing!

That's what Simon the Pharisee did today...he saw the uninvited woman crying over Jesus...wiping his feet with her hair...and anointing them with oil. He immediately judged her to be SINFUL, because for her to touch a man in such a way was wrong by EVERY account in their world...AND, look at that expensive oil...she could ill afford to have THAT!

Jesus knew, of course...that the sins of the woman were no different from the sins of the Pharisee...and because Jesus knew what was in the hearts of BOTH people...he also KNEW that the woman really understood what she was doing...and that Simon didn't have a clue...

This past Monday was just chaotic at Share & Care...several volunteers are on vacation, so there are a few people trying hard to keep up the work of many. Also, the Client Coordinator...Johnny... is on vacation...and our main warehouse worker is also on vacation. Because of all these vacations...on Monday, I was filling in during client office hours...and on that particular afternoon, there were over 35 families packed into our waiting room...WAITING.

NOISE seemed to be the order of the day: loud talking...loud laughing...and CONSTANT loud crying and screaming by kids whose parents just ignored their voices and their complaining. After nearly 2 hours of seeing people and offering whatever we could do...I was getting a bit frazzled and impatient with the crowd. I called the next name on the list...which turned out to be a VERY strange looking man...maybe mid-60's in age...he

came in and sat down...staring at me with a deep stare...and saying nothing. I asked if he needed food...he nodded his head...obviously not much info coming from THIS guy! Finding his file on the computer...I noticed that it contained several pages...the man had been coming in for food quite often...and for a VERY long time. In my impatience, I thought to myself that he must just be one of the people who comes in every month to “*get my groceries*”, as they say. I handed him the receipt to pick up his food...and tried to head him out the door. He just stood there...and his direct stare into my eyes made me feel a bit uncomfortable. Then, he stuck out his hand...with two \$1 bills. Caught off guard, I said “*Oh no...you don’t have to give me money!*”

But he kept his hand out and replied quietly, “*Maam, I’ve been coming in here for a lotta years...and ya’ll have given me food every time. This is the first time I’ve ever had money left out of my check, and I want to give it to you to use for somebody.*” I thanked him and took the money...but he just stood there for a moment, staring at me. When he did leave, I rushed into the pantry and shared the story with the pantry volunteers...more to convince my OWN self of what happened, I think...than to let them in on the story.

There’s a young woman in my life...a very pretty and smart young woman...who is a loving mother to her little daughter...and whom I believe to have lots of potential for a great future. The problem is...her husband beats her, and she refuses to prosecute him when he gets arrested. Her husband has taken their seven-year-old child from her...and taught the child to call her mother horrible names...and to say how mean the mother treats “her daddy”...and I have seen this young woman sobbing out of control...hysterically...because of what he can legally get away with. I have actually seen her with a badly swollen face & head...swearing to me that her husband wouldn’t hit her, unless “*I do stupid things, and that make him mad*”. My counseling to her always includes something like “*WHY are you staying with this guy... WHY haven’t you learned... WHY don’t you do what we al tell you to do, and stop letting him hurt you before it’s too late?*” I’ve said those words so many times now...that after the most recent episode, I finally “heard” myself in all my well-meaning display of attitude...standing in judgment of her and other women in her situation...thinking that I would never be so crazy as to live the way SHE does...trying to convince her that I know so much more about her life than she does, and that she should LISTEN to me, because I know what she should do...

Jesus was obviously hoping to teach Simon a lesson about people on the night that he was invited to dine with Simon and his friends. Being Jesus...I’m sure that he was already aware of what was in Simon’s heart...Simon wasn’t a bad person...in fact, we think that he was a good person...a “righteous” person, who tried to DO for others, because it was the correct way to live.

That night, he had invited nice people to his home...he served rich and delicious foods...and because he assumed that his guests were proud to be invited to his generous party...Simon felt no need to offer the typical basins for washing hands...or towels and oil to clean and soothe tired feet. After all...it was pretty much a privilege for guests to be invited to his home and to gather in such splendid surroundings! Then, here comes a woman...a sinful woman, at that...wandering into his house uninvited...and going directly to where Jesus sat at table. It appears that Simon again assumed that since Jesus claimed

to be a prophet...he SURELY knew that the woman was sinful...and that would immediately send her out and tell her how she insulted them all when she barged in on their meal! But.....it didn't turn out the way that Simon had imagined...

I'm reminded here about visiting with a friend that I have always known to be very caring and open-minded...we were talking about cooking meals for people who need help...and then serving them in a public building in town. Without even knowing what he said...my friend talked about the need to be sure to lock particular doors so that "THOSE KINDS" of people wouldn't be wandering around in areas where they don't belong. My friend never even stopped to hear himself...but I did...and I also heard the voice of my own self and of other people...right along with his...

Ya know...I have come to believe...that God impacts our lives far more often than most of us ever notice...revealing to us little glimpses of Grace...if we only allow ourselves to have the eyes to see...and the heart to feel...

Through the Share & Care program, I've known a particular woman client for nearly 19 years. Long ago, this woman would have frightened even the meanest man in the county...she was a HUGE woman...and reminiscent of what we used to call "roller derby women"...with lots of tattoos and scars covering her arms and body. She had long deep black hair, hanging down her face and back...sometimes in braids, sometimes hanging loose and wild. Her black eyes held a cold, hard stare when talking to me. She was a known drug dealer...she'd done prison time for dealing...hard drugs, nothing simple like marijuana...and also for prostitution. Though she and I got along fine...when she would come in for help...I found myself just hurriedly doing what she wanted, in order to get her OUT of my office sooner than later! I did notice from the beginning, though...that she was always helping people in her life...loaning her last money for gasoline...for food...for cigarettes...she seemed to have loving friends...and I thought it was a bit peculiar...

A few years ago, this woman became very ill...she lost so much weight that she now is just a shadow of herself...her black hair is long gone...and only tufts of mostly gray are left on her head. Her teeth are black and nearly non-existent from years of drug use...and she can barely hobble on her own two feet. She easily looks 15 or 20 years older than she is. I tell you...I can't explain it, but I've always known that this woman has one of the biggest and most Christian hearts that I have ever known in my work with people at Share & Care. She's obviously very sick...still pretty scary looking... and certainly not someone easily accepted in any public restaurant in town...yet she cooks & shares her little bit of food for those in her apartment house...she sits with friends who are sick or in the hospital...or in the jail...she drives people around to get food or see the doctor when she's able...this woman absolutely trusts that God is with her...prays for everyone everyday...and she never complains about what she's been given to deal with for the rest of her life on earth.

Here's where I need to repeat something I said earlier...I have come to believe that God impacts our lives far more often than most of us ever notice...revealing to us little glimpses of Grace...if we only allow ourselves to have the eyes to see...and the heart to feel...

When the Harrison city trash contract was changed a few months ago...the cost of having Share & Care's monthly trash bill doubled in price, as did everyone's in the city. In order to save money...and to keep more things out of the landfill...one of the

warehouse guys decided to put all the stuff that we can't sell or give away...out on the dock for people to take if they want. Much of what we end up putting out there is broken, dirty, and pretty unusable, in our opinion. I really do HATE this whole process...but we do it anyway. So, when I drove up to my office one day last week...I became fuming mad as I approached my parking spot and saw the big crowd of people...men, women, & children...on the dock, going through boxes and bags...loading their cars, trucks, baby buggies, and anything else they had to help cart the stuff home.

Well, I greeted everyone quickly as I stomped into my office...sat at my desk and turned on the computer, to start my day. Immediately, the door buzzer went off...so I went back to the door to see what THEY wanted now. One of the "regulars"....a woman with a bunch of grandchildren in tow...wanted me to see that she and a couple of other "regulars" had big brooms, and were sweeping cigarette butts in the parking lot...while all the kids picked up the trash in the grass. Then, as I'm standing there now feeling a bit self-conscious...the woman's grown son, who is disabled himself...hollered at me from his old truck...asking if I needed him to carry in all the food from our van...because "*YOUR ARM AIN'T STRONG ENOUGH TO DO IT YET, is it Joy?!*" And THEN....making me feel even worse...another woman pushed ahead with a big chocolate cake in a beat up old pan...for me to take to the kitchen for our volunteers to eat!!

Okay....eventually I went back inside, mumbling to myself "*WHY ME???* *Can't Johnny ever get caught acting like Simon the Pharisee?!*" Like I said...I sure wasn't happy about all of this trash stuff...even though I do admit now that it DOES save us money...and I AM glad that it goes to people who probably use it for something...if only it didn't LOOK SO TACKY to have THOSE people on the porch all day...

I thought of all these stories that happen so routinely in my job and with the people who gather at our building every day...as I read the scripture over and over this week, trying to decide what to say today. Sorry for me to have to say...I began to understand about Simon the Pharisee way MORE than I wished I did...because he's not exactly the model of someone that I would like to think I resemble! But, I do also believe and understand that he's REAL...and that he's probably closer to where ALL of us ARE...when our guard is down.

There's really a lot for us to grasp in today's Gospel story, but one thing seems to stand out to me more...and it's not just us coming to realize our OWN sins. Jesus seems to be telling Simon that HE is part of the big problem...that WE are part of the problem. Simon did not...WE do not...acknowledge the woman as a person of value, as a person loved by God...a true child of God. Simon judged her...WE judge her...probably by outward appearance...by her assumed reputation in town...and most likely without giving it much real thought at all. Without really meaning to be uncaring...Simon, and We...deny that God loves each of us exactly the same...regardless of the weight of the sin that we ALL bear in exactly the same way...and totally regardless of how we look, live, or act. How many of US, though...will readily admit that we can identify with the woman at Jesus' feet...how many of US will cry the tears of joy and pain...right along with her...as we come to realize that WE, TOO, are loved simply for WHO we are?

We're ALL on a spiritual journey of some type, aren't we...we ALL have times of being the woman at the feet of Jesus...or playing the part of a Pharisee...and we've ALL surely prayed for help from the Holy Spirit. In a very simple story, Jesus is trying to teach

US...through the actions of this woman and this dinner party that he attended. Jesus is determined to keep reminding US that our sins are forgiven, too...that to follow in HIS way...WE must BELIEVE that our sins are forgiven...and that WE must believe that God loves us without end.

You can be SURE that I wasn't happy with the picture of myself as I reflected about the woman crying over Jesus...and the actions of Simon the Pharisee...but I think if I had it to do all over again...I would bet that my own actions wouldn't change all that much...given the circumstances. One thing I DO know...is that my outer deeds and the attitudes that I showed in those stories...are NOT what I want to be remembered for in my life!

SO...for now at least, I THINK that I've named it...I KNOW that I've prayed about it...and I BELIEVE that I have asked the Holy Spirit to be with me next time...to KEEP me more aware of my compassion and respect for others...to remind me to keep my ears and my heart open and prepared to allow Grace to come into my life...and most of all, to RECOGNIZE the grace...

I WILL pray that I DO recognize it...especially if it's about the time that I'll be working on another sermon that includes ANY Pharisees in it! I sure would hate to have to admit all these things again too soon...

AMEN.