

**Reject or Rejoice, Which Will It Be?**

**June 12, 2016**

**Luke 7:36-8:3**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the One who can even forgive your Sin, amen.

I have to say the woman in this Gospel story reminds me of Nathaniel Hawthorns character Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter. She had to wear a red letter A on her clothing where everyone could see it indicating she was a sinner, an adulteress who was caught because she became pregnant. Everyone could then avoid her, or gossip about her when they saw her coming. I don’t think the unnamed woman in this Gospel story wore a scarlet letter on her chest, but somehow she was a sinner and everyone knew it. As I reviewed the commentaries on this story it seems that over the centuries people have assumed she was a harlot even though Luke never tells us what her sin was. If she was a woman who practiced the oldest profession, perhaps Simon knew about her sin because he had availed himself of her services… But I speculate…

Whatever her sin, somehow she intrudes into this gathering. Actually, she interrupts it. First by her mere presence. She is after all, a sinner. The term “sinner” is used in many ways and different contexts in Luke’s gospel. Peter says to Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish, “I am a sinner” (5:8) – so, let’s not assume she’s a prostitute, as if that’s the only sin a first-century woman is capable of committing. Let’s just take the story at face value and whatever it is she’s done, the others, including Simon the Pharisee, know about it.

The intrusion soon escalates as she lavishes attention on Jesus. She stands behind him weeping, and proceeds to clean his feet, washing them with her tears, drying them with her hair, finally applying ointment she has brought. Some might call her actions bold, considering the proper place for a woman in ancient times and that a woman wasn’t supposed to let her hair down in public. She doesn’t allow social rules to stop her adoration of this rabbi/prophet who she knows to be the Messiah and her salvation. The question isn’t whether people will say something, but what they will say. How does she think she can get away with this? What prompts such an outrageous public display of affection?

Jesus, apparently, has no doubt about what has prompted her display of extravagant hospitality and extreme devotion. He also knows the contempt in the mind of Simon, his host. Jesus calls Simon out for his disapproving, judgmental attitude. Who do you think would be more grateful, Jesus asks, a man whose very large debt was cancelled or a man who had a small debt that was also cancelled? Simon knows how to count, and so answers that he supposes it would be the man for whom the greater debt was cancelled. (“Supposes”? – really, Simon, you only suppose?)

The obvious analogy is to the woman who has been bathing his feet with tears. She has been forgiven much, perhaps ten times what others have been forgiven, and she knows it. This explains why she is devoting herself to Jesus, weeping as she does. She is overcome by gratitude, the kind of gratitude understood only by someone who has been given everything.

After his exchange with Simon, Jesus turns and addresses the woman directly, saying that, “your sins are forgiven.” So this story is about forgiveness. And it’s about the gratitude that forgiveness creates. And it’s about the extravagant acts of love and devotion that gratitude prompts. But it’s also about something else as well. It’s about hardness of heart as opposed to love, about judgment instead of forgiveness, and about a sense of entitlement instead of gratitude. If it were only about forgiveness, love, and gratitude telling this short parable would have been enough. The parable explains the woman’s actions because she is like one who had the five hundred denarii debt forgiven. Friends, that’s well over a year’s wages, a huge sum of money. That would have been enough, but Jesus doesn’t stop there. Instead, he compares her actions of extravagant hospitality with that of Simon’s. He changes his focus from her devotion to Simon’s neglect. It’s not that Simon would have been expected to wash Jesus feet with his tears. It’s that her extravagance magnifies Simon’s utter lack of hospitality, not providing even the minimum of what a good host would normally offer a guest.

Why this change of focus? Jesus changes the focus because the truth He points to cuts both ways. It’s not only that one who has been forgiven much loves much from gratitude, it’s also true that the one who is forgiven little loves little and feels little if any gratitude.

The truth is those who have been forgiven little may not even notice they have in fact been forgiven. Perhaps they don’t even think they need it. Who knows –they may even totally dismiss the very idea forgiveness as something they need. Harrumph, forgiveness is what I give to others, I certainly haven’t done anything that needs to be forgiven… Forgiveness is for those like this woman who is clearly a sinner, clearly beneath them, and so clearly in need of forgiveness. But me? Need forgiveness? Hardly! And so it goes. If we cannot admit our need, we cannot receive the remedy for our lack, and as a result, we will not experience the gratitude of those who have received, well… everything. And so, we are unable to love with abandon.

This certainly seems to be Simon’s situation. He’s invited Jesus over but shows him no hospitality – which makes one wonder whether he invited Jesus sincerely or more for sport. And rather than be taken aback by the woman’s show of love, he judges both her and Jesus. He is a man who has no sense of being forgiven – even of needing forgiveness – and so is trapped in a judgmental hardness of heart.

This story tells both halves of the truth: the joyful truth that those who recognize their need receive their heart’s desire and live out of gratitude and love, and the tragic truth that those who believe themselves righteous or self-sufficient never know the joy of receiving and so live truncated lives without genuine gratitude or love. Part joyful, part tragic, this whole story functions something as a parable for the entire Church from the beginning through today.

In some ways this brief but powerful story explains why Jesus was killed. I mean, when you think about it, Jesus’ death is something of a puzzle. Jesus earthly ministry can be summed up as one of preaching, teaching, healing, and feeding. It sort of makes me wonder, why anyone would want to get rid of a guy like that? Until you get to a story like this. A story where Jesus forgives sin. You might be sitting there thinking, Pastor, what’s so bad about forgiveness… Nothing…as long as you believe you need it.

There are two main characters in this story. To one, forgiveness is sheer blessing, something so beautiful and so important it breaks her heart and all she can do is express her gratitude. Why? Because she knows she needs it. The other character, Simon, is pretty sure he doesn’t need forgiveness. He is righteous. He obeys the law. He does what he should. Not much different than you and me… So, not only does he not need forgiveness, but the very mention of it is threatening, even offensive to him. It’s no wonder, really, why the religious leaders wanted to put Jesus to death so badly…

It’s a great story, isn’t it. Here’s the thing. It’s not over. I mean, it’s one thing to explore the story as a quaint tale of Jesus life and ministry, but it’s another to recognize this story is being played out even as we read it. Most of us pick up pretty quickly that Simon is the bad guy here, the one who is judgmental and isn’t really into Jesus’ forgiveness. We, quite naturally find ourselves judging Simon and then, all of a sudden – BAM – we realize we are Simon, with the same penchant to go searching for the splinters in our neighbor’s eye rather than pull out the plank in our own. We’re the ones who should be forced to wear the big red scarlet S for sinner on our chests. Once that happens, we have to decide. I mean, up to this point, there’s not a lot we can do: we are who we are: sinners…like this woman…and like Simon. **But**, once that sin has been revealed yet again in us, then the choice is before us: rejoice or resent. Embrace our identity as sinners and as those beloved by God and forgiven all things, or reject our failings and with it God’s tender embrace. Which will it be?

May our eyes and hearts be opened to recognize our sin. May we be broken by our reflection in the mirror of the Law and in that brokenness may we receive the joy of knowing how much we’ve been forgiven. Knowing our true nature, may we be bold, even audacious in our love for the one who made our forgiveness and joy possible. To Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord be glory and Honor now and forever, amen.