

Pentecost 4 – Year C – BAS
 St. Mark's Halifax, June 12, 2016
 Fr. Jim Purchase

Readings: The Collect - page 362
 1 Kings 21:1-10, 11-14, 15-21a
 Psalm 5:1-8
 Galatians 2:15-21
 +St. Luke 7:36 - 8:3

“A Sinner’s Gratitude”

Two Sundays ago we celebrated the “Feast of the Holy Trinity” when we celebrated God’s **loving relationship with us** as Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Last Sunday we saw that love revealed in **compassion** in the restoring to life of the Widow of Nain’s son. Today, we celebrate that love revealed in **forgiveness**.

St. Paul says to us this morning: “..we know that a person is justified not by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ...the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

The woman in our Gospel this morning came to believe that too - her story is a story of gratitude.

Although the conclusion of the story gives the impression that the woman is forgiven because of her loving actions - it is the PARABLE which is the centre of the story - and the Parable makes it clear that **LOVE is the RESULT of being forgiven** - not forgiveness being the result of the love given.

The Story: Jesus is a dinner guest of Simon the Pharisee. UNINVITED, the woman bursts on the scene - goes over to Jesus - pours perfume from an alabaster flask on Jesus’ feet - crying uncontrollably - her tears mixing with the perfume. We are not told her name - all we can assume is that she must have met Jesus before, and found acceptance and forgiveness from Him - and she just had to find a way of expressing her gratitude.

Simon disapproves of her behaviour - as well as her presence - and he seems to know her reputation. Her “**exact sin**” is never disclosed, although many have suggested she was a prostitute - but Jesus gives no hint of there being a sexual meaning to her actions. The Musical “*Jesus Christ Superstar*” implies a sexual meaning and falsely refers to the woman as being Mary Magdalene. There is nothing to indicate either, all we are told is that **she is a sinner**. At the beginning of the story, Luke only tells us that she was “*A woman in the city, who was a sinner..*” Simon’s judgement of her in verse 39 is that “*she is a sinner..*” And Jesus says in verse 47: “*..her sins, which are many, have been forgiven.*” Jesus only implies that her actions are acts of hospitality, given out of deep love.

Attempts to determine what the actual sin - or sins - of this woman were, are futile on our part. All that matters is Jesus' interpretation of her actions.

Simon's judgement of her sets the stage for the Parable of the "Two Debtors" - and it is the Parable which is at the heart of the story.

The woman illustrates one of the debtors - Simon the other debtor who has little sense of forgiveness, and is hardly aware of his own need of forgiveness. With his self-righteous, judgemental attitude, HE LOVED LITTLE.

But Simon is not the central character - **the woman is** - her lavish behaviour exemplifies the best characteristics of behaviours. **Her focus is on Jesus** - she is indebted to Him - He is the one who has shown acceptance and forgiveness - and she feels so much gratitude. That she broke a number of the social codes of the day doesn't matter.

A) - she is a woman - this is an all-male dinner - she was not invited.

B) - the purpose of the meal was so that Simon & his fellow Pharisees could discuss religious matters with Jesus. In that cultural setting, theology was solely a male prerogative - it was not the business of women. In some cultures today, that still is the case.

C) - she was a sinner - Simon seems to imply he knows her reputation, and doesn't want to be seen with her, let alone have her in his house.

D) - but probably what really upset Simon was - she let down her hair in public - & in the presence of male strangers. Respectable women, according to Simon's belief (and in some cultures even today) - would only do that in the privacy of her home, not in public.

But this woman is not concerned about modesty - or even social conventions of her day - **innocently & without thinking** - she unties her hair to wipe the dripping ointment, dripping from Jesus' feet. Jesus recognizes the innocence of her actions AS WELL AS her motives - He accepts what she has done. Simon and the other men present may read something else in her actions - and probably did - but NOT JESUS.

The story is a very moving one - but it is also a candid one. The question always at the back of the mind is: "*How good do I have to be for God to forgive me?*" In the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5:48, Jesus tells us that God demands "perfection" - what human being has ever satisfied that? Paul speaks the truth in Romans 3:23: "*For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" None of us can satisfy that demand, no matter how hard we try.

Sin is real - it leaves its mark - and our sin can hurt others. We cannot undo the past.

But the fact of sin is balanced by another great truth - sin cannot separate us from the love of God any more than death can. *"Your sins are forgiven"* Jesus said to the woman - *"...go in peace."*

Sin cannot be obliterated, but it can be transformed by penitence and forgiveness. **Forgiveness is the nature of a loving God** - He bore our sins and nailed them to the Cross. We are the recipients of His atoning sacrifice - and this is what we celebrate at every Eucharist. Because of Christ's death on the Cross, and the love of God revealed there, new possibilities of service and devotion await us.

Our worship this morning is always pour loving response to the love of God. And the woman in today's Gospel gives us the final lesson on gratitude - **she was forgiven because she loved.** Her love for Jesus came first, and because of that she was forgiven. *"Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."* This is exactly what St. John tells us in his Epistles: *"We love him because he first loved us."*

We come here today because we believe in a loving Creator and Redeemer. We celebrate His love of us - and it is only because we believe this, that we ask for and receive divine forgiveness.

Thanks be to God!