

The Righteousness of Love

Psalms 5:1-8, 11-12

*For you bless the righteous, O Lord,
you cover them with favor as with a shield.*

Luke 7:36-8:3 *“Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have
been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.”*

Jesus has been having a hard go of it. Some of the Pharisees have accused him of moral looseness, for Jesus says, just before our reading from Luke’s gospel for this morning: “...the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’” (7:34-35) Jesus is doing all the wrong things according to the “sin and righteousness” mindset. Eating and drinking a little too much. Attending parties and wedding celebrations. Hanging out with persons judged by traditional religious morality to be immoral and sinners.

Jesus abhorred the kind of righteousness that separates “us” from “them.” He was more interested in being with people, all kinds of people, especially those who fell outside the boundaries of acceptable religion and morality. He had a different understanding of righteousness and what it means to be persons who are righteous, that is, people who are in a right relationship with God. And it had nothing to do with the kind of moralizing dished out by those Pharisees who were attacking him.

So we have this story of Jesus being invited to a Pharisee’s home for dinner. Jesus didn’t mind hanging out with Pharisees either! He wanted to give anybody a chance to see things differently, to live a different kind of life, the life of God’s kingdom.

They are at the table and in comes a woman from the city who is described as a “sinner.” We don’t know what her sins are. Luke doesn’t tell us. We might fill in the blanks with any sort of “sin” that is normally tagged on someone who is not in the middle or upper class, who is not part of formal religion, or who is simply in some way outside of what we call “acceptable” society.

This woman has brought a jar of oil. She “stands behind” Jesus at his feet, says Luke. This sounds like an awkward position. But I think Luke’s point is that this woman is very aware of her status in society and is trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Maybe she expects to be tossed out at any moment. But she just had to see Jesus, to touch him, to show him how she felt about him. Whatever the source of her pain, her longing, her desperation, her tears come in a flood so that she washes his feet with them, using her hair to wipe his feet. Then she anoints his feet with oil. These are all serious acts of hospitality in that day. Feet would get filthy, tired, hot and sore on the dusty and rocky roads and streets. A host would often perform this foot washing as a sign of welcome and

hospitality. But here is this strange woman who comes into a Pharisee’s house and performs the act.

Jesus sees the irony of the situation. The one who is “righteous” has neglected this most basic human act of welcome toward the very person he invited as a guest. The one who is the “sinner” shows hospitality with a deep and expressive affection that is profoundly moving, if not disarming. And the point is not lost on Jesus.

The Pharisee host is grumbling to himself. If this guy were really a prophet, he wouldn’t allow this kind of woman to touch him. He wouldn’t go near her. He would separate himself from her. Now, Jesus either has extremely good ears or he can read minds and hearts. He sees right through to the truth of people and situations. “Simon,” he says, “I’ve got something to say to you.” Simon the Pharisee is caught! He has no choice but to say sheepishly: “Speak, teacher.”

Jesus tells one of his briefest parables. A creditor had one person who owed him a tremendous amount of money and one who owed a little bit. He forgave both their debts. Who will love the creditor more? Well, that’s a no-brainer! Simon gets that right away. The one who was forgiven the greatest debt.

Simon got the right answer but not the point. So Jesus brings it home. This woman you look down on as a sinner comes into your house. She hasn’t stopped crying, washing my feet and anointing them with oil. When I came here, you didn’t give me an embrace or offer water for my dirty and tired feet, and you certainly offered no oil to soothe them. This woman may be the greatest of sinners in your opinion and everyone else’s. But she knows she is forgiven by God and she is showing her gratitude and love by her actions. Then Jesus formally pronounces her sins forgiven and tells her that her faith has made her whole and sends her on her way.

Like other stories and parables of Jesus, this one has a familiar ring. The one who is caught up in his or her own righteousness and engages in judging others is the one who in reality is very far away from God. The one who is humble enough to know how much he or she needs God’s love and mercy is the one who is made whole and happy, the one who shows great love. The parable of the so-called prodigal son: the son who messed up and felt he could never be accepted back in his father’s house is joyously welcomed home by his father, who isn’t even interested in hearing his confessions; the son who stayed at home and did all the right things shows himself unable to respond in love toward his brother, and is left standing out in the field angrily kicking clods, refusing to join the welcome home party for his brother. Two men go up to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee and his prayer amounts to telling God what a great guy he is compared to that other fellow who is a tax collector and sinner. And that poor soul is all bent over in humility and awareness of his shortcomings, throwing himself on God’s mercy. He’s the one who goes home “justified,” in a right relationship with God. The other doesn’t even know how far he is from God.

Jesus is interested in a righteousness of love. Not how religious we are. Not how moral we are. He doesn’t want us obsessing with self-concern over our own performance. He wants us to love with the love of God. If we get caught up in the business of judging who is good and who is evil, who is righteous and who is a sinner, who is holy and who is not, then we get lost. Such judgments are very

useful in religion and society when it comes to reducing people to inferior status. Mr. Reagan's death has aroused curious responses. It is said that his greatness as a leader stemmed from his having "made us feel good about ourselves" as a nation. And yet, the rhetoric of those years, which continues today, is such that those who are poor, who have no reason to "feel good about ourselves as a nation," are judged to be not just poor but immoral and inferior. Those who are affluent and self-sufficient are judged to be righteous and justified in abandoning the obligation to help our brothers and sisters, which is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is not that Jesus did not believe there is such a thing as sin. It's just that he turns the tables, upsets the categories, shocks our traditional way of thinking. He wants us to understand that love is superior to notions of sinfulness and righteousness. Love, in fact, is the definition of righteousness. And the real test of our spiritual maturity, a real sign of whether or not we are in touch with Jesus, is if we are able to move from thinking only of our own lives, our own well-being either spiritually or materially, and move into community with those who are outside the usual religious and societal categories of what is right and acceptable. Are we able to be at Jesus' feet, washing them with our tears, our hearts overwhelmed by the gracious love of God for us in spite of all the junk that is part of our lives? Are we then able to open our hearts to each other and to every other person, seeing beyond the blinders of judgment and into the wonderful depths of another human being, made in God's image?

The other day another special thing happened at the Festival Center. Just at noon, as we were getting ready to go to the chapel for worship, a mother and her two young boys came to the door and knocked. They had seen the sign for daily worship and were interested in what this place was about. Only Kaye and I who were there. We invited them in, introduced ourselves all around and showed them through the Center. When we got to the children's room, the boys went straight to the large dollhouse we have there. It has two families, one black, one white, and lots of small furniture for arranging. We have found that the boys who come to the children's program also find a great attraction toward that dollhouse. Sylvia Hobson later explained to me that she thinks this is very normal for children whose lives are so unstable and insecure. They love to do things at play which are domestic in nature—cooking, cleaning, playing with dollhouses, and such. It seems to give them a sense of order.

This family, we found out, is homeless, living in the Hand Up Lodge while they search for housing and a job. We invited them back that evening to a reception we had for neighbors. We were delighted when they did in fact come. We sat around the table with the others who had come, enjoying ice cream and cookies, sharing ideas about what this Center might be and do for the community. The two boys piped right up with their ideas—an after school program with snacks and creative activities, and—this one blew us away!—an anger management program for kids.

I'm sharing all of this because I found such a warmth and gentleness, such a beauty and love in this family. By all the standards of what our society and our churches judge to be "righteous"—success, affluence, influence, power—these persons are on the "outside." And yet I find in so many people who are struggling desperately with life an incredibly resilient spirit of kindness, gentleness, and love.

These are the ones who know what Jesus is about, who really know who Jesus is. They are somehow, through all the terrible struggles of their lives, able to stay in touch with that most powerful of powers—the power of love. That's true righteousness. And I guess that's part of my own personal reason for being part of the Festival Center mission. I need to be close to such people so that my heart doesn't become hard and my life doesn't become isolated and suffocated in a religion of separateness. Somehow I think that all of us who come into the Center, those in the mission group or who help in other ways, those who drift in from the neighborhood wondering what it's about, the children who come on Saturdays—all of us are somehow pouring out our tears, washing the feet of Jesus, trying to immerse ourselves in that love that is the true hope of the world—the love of God, which is God's own righteousness.

This woman's great love touches Jesus' own heart. This is what he is looking for. This is what he is seeking to touch in us. This is what he wants to draw forth from us—the great love with which God made us and the love with which we can love God and the world. There is such a thing as righteousness, as being in a right relationship with God. But it is not that business of obeying the rules or meeting the right moral or doctrinal standards. The righteousness we are able to nurture in ourselves is the righteousness of love. It involves a spiritual struggle, most often a struggle with our selves, those things that keep us from loving those nearest to us and those outside of our circles. It is a righteousness that seeks to bring people together, not separate them into categories of holy and unholy, moral and immoral, right and wrong, and so forth. When we have in ourselves a love for Christ like that of the woman from the city, a love that arises out of our great need for God's mercy and forgiveness, a love that seeks to be united with God's own love, then we are on our way to the only righteousness that matters.