

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 11
June 17, 2007

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15
Psalm 32
Galatians 2:15-21
Luke 7:36-8:3

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

In 1963 Sidney Poitier became the first black person to win an Academy Award for Best Actor for his role in *Lilies of the Field*. In 1967 he starred in another box office hit called, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. In this movie, Poitier played a controversial role which was very much taboo for the times.

He played the role of a black man who was engaged to marry a white woman. It was set in the 1960's during the days of the Civil Rights Movement that was causing division and riots throughout our country. The cast members of the movie actually received death threats due to the movie's controversial nature.

Nevertheless, this movie boldly confronted the problems of biases and racism that plagued our country not only back then, but also somewhat, to this day.

The centerpiece of the movie was a dinner party given by the bride's parents to meet her fiancé and his parents. The bride's white parents are astonished to find that the groom is a black man. And the groom's parents are none too happy either when they discover that the bride is a white woman.

To make the movie a little more acceptable to the public, there was a lot of humor added to the script. Even so, the subject material of the film was certainly uncomfortable in its day to say the least.

Our Gospel story today also talks about an unexpected dinner guest. On this day, there was a man named Simon who invited Jesus to eat with him. Now Simon was a Pharisee, a strict keeper of the Law. He was the one to be looked up to. He was the expert when it came to religious matters. He set the bar when it came to morality.

Now Simon had heard what Jesus had been saying and doing throughout the region. He had heard of the miracles and the controversial teachings of this Rabbi from Nazareth. He also knew that many people were beginning to follow him, some of them, with questionable reputations.

Perhaps he thought that if he had Jesus over for dinner, he could set him straight on a few matters. You know, he could remind Jesus that it was not acceptable to work on the Sabbath. And it was not appropriate to be seen with sinners and those who were unclean.

So to say the least, it is rather tense as Jesus comes to the door.

And right off the bat, Simon blows it. Perhaps he was just being lazy that day. Or, more likely, his actions, or lack of, were intentional to try and make a point.

You see, in understanding this story, it's helpful to understand the etiquette and customs of a particular culture.

Therefore, I am going to give you a little quiz:

1. At a formal dinner, when should you start eating the main course?
 - a. After the host or hostess lifts their fork?
 - b. As soon as someone says; "Good food, good meat, good God, let's eat!"
 - c. After everyone at the table has received their food?
 - d. As soon as the plate hits the table, with urgency and passion?

2. What do you do at a formal dinner if you are still hungry after the main course?
 - a. Politely request a second helping?
 - b. Ask in an angry voice, “Is that all there is?”
 - c. Yell, “Look out the window!” and then take food from your neighbor’s plate while he or she is distracted?
 - d. Secretly call Domino’s Pizza?

3. What is the correct response if your cell phone goes off during worship?
 - a. Quickly slide it forward and point disgustedly at the person in front of you?
 - b. Shout “hallelujah” until it stops ringing?
 - c. Give a larger than usual offering?
 - d. Answer the phone and yell, “My baby!” and run out of the room?

Two thousand years ago, someone like Simon would have known the answers to all of these questions. Therefore, in order for us to get a better understanding of this story, we must understand the etiquette and culture of New Testament times.

You see, when Simon, a Pharisee, invited Jesus to his house, he knew that Jesus, being a rabbi, should be recognized as a guest of honor. The customary greeting was a kiss on the cheek. The kiss was not an expression of affection, but simply a polite acknowledgement of the guest’s arrival, especially if the guest were a person of equal social rank.

But when Jesus arrived at the Pharisee’s house, he was not greeted with a kiss. In effect, he was ignored.

Today, it would be similar to being invited to someone’s home for dinner. When you arrive, you find that the door is open, so you assume that they intend for you to come in. But when you enter, you see that the family members are busy watching television, or texting on their phones, and never even get up from the La-Z-boy to acknowledge you, or even say, “hello.”

Also, the washing of feet was mandatory before a meal. If the guest were of higher status, the host would perform this duty himself. If not, he might have his servant do it. To not do it at all would be like us today, requiring a guest to wash the dishes following the meal.

Finally, a thoughtful host would also give his guests some scented olive oil for anointing, though this was somewhat optional. With a very warm climate, and a scarcity of deodorant, such a gesture was particularly refreshing.

So, Jesus arrived at the Pharisee's home and receives nothing. Simon does not give him a greeting, no water for his feet, and no scented oil for his head. Everyone in the room knows that Jesus is being treated rudely, as if a deliberate slap in the face. Our youth today would probably say, "Dud, he was majorly dissed!"

And this brings us to the second part of our story today. After Jesus took his place at the table, a woman, who was described as being a sinner, came and stood behind Jesus. She knelt down to his feet. She was weeping.

And she began to bathe Jesus' feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. She then began continually kissing his feet and then she anointed them with expensive ointment.

Simon was horrified! Not only at what this tramp of a woman was doing, but also the fact that Jesus was letting it happen. This is scandalous! thought Simon.

You see, Simon saw himself as being the righteous one and this woman as unrighteous. She was scum. She was disgusting. She was human trash. She was a sinner.

The woman on the other hand realized her sinfulness. Therefore, she came in humility seeking mercy.

So which of these characters in this story can you relate to? Do you find yourself in Simon or in the woman? I would guess a little of both. Yes, even if we don't want to admit it, we all have a part of Simon living in us. We can get a little self righteous.

We lead a pretty good life. We haven't killed anyone. We haven't stolen anything. We are generally law abiding citizens. We are involved in our local church. We give money to worthy causes. Yes, when it comes right down to it, we think that we're pretty darn good compared to many people.

But there is also a little bit of the woman in us. For we too have been broken. We have failed to always live like a so-called "good" Christian.

We know what it is like to have our own little dark secrets in life that we think no one else knows about. We have felt the pain of guilt and rejection, thinking that we are not good enough.

We know that no matter how hard we try, there are sinful things that we still continue to do. There are also things that God has called us to do that we don't do. We realize deep down inside that indeed we deserve judgment.

And it is then, like the woman in our story, that we come humbly before God and plead for mercy and forgiveness. And Jesus is there to give it to us, even though we don't deserve it.

To the woman in our story Jesus said; "Your sins are forgiven." Indeed he freed her from the judgment of the Pharisee, who self righteously thought that he represented God.

And he still says that today – to you and me. We are assured of this every time we gather for worship and hear the words of forgiveness after confession, and when we receive the body and blood of our Lord "for the forgiveness of sin."

There is a story about how Abraham Lincoln once went to a slave auction. He noticed a rather attractive black woman who was about to be auctioned off. So he began the bidding. The bidding went back and forth until finally, Lincoln had purchased her.

They brought her over to him. He then instructed them to take the shackles off her wrists and ankles. Then he said to her; “You are free to go.”

She looked at him and said; “You mean that I don’t have to go home with you?” He replied, “No, you don’t.” She said, “You mean that I don’t have to do what you tell me to do. Or say what you tell me to say?” “That’s right.” “You mean I don’t have to be your slave – I don’t have to obey all of your whims and fancies?” He said; “No, you don’t. You are free to go.”

She bowed her head. Tears began rolling down her cheeks. She looked up at Abraham Lincoln and said; “Then I guess that I’ll go with you.”

You see, when Jesus sets us free. When we hear his words of mercy and forgiveness. When we feel the weight that he lifts off of our shoulders. When we experience his unconditional love, with no strings attached – that is when our only response is to bow down at the feet of Jesus and worship.

And then Jesus will say; “Do you see this woman; Do you see this man; Do you see this child? Though their sins are many, they are forgiven.” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.

How many of you have ever helped your mom or dad carry something? What are some things that you have carried?

Some things are very heavy, and some things are not so heavy. Let's say that I give you this piece of paper to carry. Then, finally I come over to you and say; "here, let me take that paper from you". Are you going to feel relieved?

Now let's say that I give you ten books to carry. That would be pretty heavy. Then, when I come over to you and say; "here, let me take those books from you". Are you going to feel relieved?

In our Bible story today, there was a man who thought that he was pretty good. He didn't think that he did anything wrong. So how do you think he would feel if Jesus forgave his sins?

Then there was a woman who had done many bad things. She was crying, and she was sad. Then Jesus told her that he forgave all of those bad things. How do you think she felt?

That's what we can do also. We try to do good things, but sometimes we don't. That's when we need to ask Jesus to forgive us and help us. It is like someone taking those ten books away from us.

Let us pray... Dear Jesus, thank you so very much for forgiving us and taking away the heaviness of sin. We love you. Amen.