

Reminiscere, The Second Sunday in Lent
St. Luke 7:36-50

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, grant us, we beseech You, Your Holy Spirit, that He may strengthen our hearts and confirm our faith and hope in your grace and mercy, so that, although we have reason to fear because of our conscience, our sin and our unworthiness, we may, nevertheless with the woman of Canaan, hold fast to Your grace, and in every trial and temptation find you a present help and refuge; we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

In the name of our Master who humbles Himself so that He might serve us even in our sinful pride, dear fellow redeemed;

No matter how many times we hear it read, no matter how many times we hear it preached on, the text we heard read as our Gospel lesson is always a little jarring. To hear how that Canaanite woman goes to Jesus begging, literally getting on her hands and knees, even allowing herself to be compared to a dog; that doesn't sit well with us. We can talk all we want about what an example of humility she is, what an example of persistence, and faith, but in reality she exhibits a bit more humility than we are often comfortable with. Think how you would feel if that behavior were exhibited by your daughter, or sister, or wife; would you commend their humility, or give them a lecture on self-respect?

And now we see that same degrading behavior exhibited by the woman in our sermon text for this morning. This woman was one of those lost sheep of Israel Jesus had spoken of to the Canaanite woman, and apparently the Lord had remembered her; Jesus had done something for her, found her and brought her back. Whatever the kindness was, the woman is so overwhelmed by it that all she can do is weep, and in humility offers Jesus the very lowly service of

washing His feet with her tears and anointing His feet with perfume. It may also be that there is an illustration in her actions, that she wishes to tell Jesus that she understands what He has done for her. She was cleansed of her sin; she would now clean the feet of her Savior.

And again, we may speak of her example of humility and sorrow of her sin, but this account also jars us a bit. It is one thing to be humble, but in a real way this woman humiliates herself by performing a very abasing task; cleaning another person's feet, and then wiping them dry with her hair. Could she have done anything else that would have screamed "subservient" louder to all those around?

Even the Pharisee who was hosting the dinner seemed to understand somewhat what was going on, and he finds it disconcerting as well. *"If this man were a prophet, He would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner"* (St Luke 7:39). Simon the Pharisee understood what was going on, but ironically he did not think she was abasing herself enough. It isn't necessarily that he doubted her sincerity, but because in his mind the feet washing thing was a pittance compared to the life of sin she had led and so he was not ready to declare her a child of God, because in his mind she had not repaid. She had not atoned.

And so in response to this Jesus tells the parable to Simon of the two debtors. And again, Simon understands the parable, he even seems a bit peeved that Jesus should ask such an obvious question, but again he misses the point. At

first he thinks Jesus is saying, "Have a heart, Simon. Okay, so she has a bit more to repent of than say, you. But heck, nobody's perfect. God will just have to spend a bit more of His mercy on her."

But the point of the parable Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee is not that some owe a little and others a lot; rather it is a lesson in pride and what grace really is. Simon was offended by the woman's actions because he did not see her as one who deserved, or really, one who had earned, the mercy of God. She owed too much. He, on the other hand, while not perfect, at least kept his debt of sin at a manageable level. He saw himself as someone who, while he sinned, was managing his guilt because he was balancing out his sin with the good he did.

Which goes to show that as much as we might like to think we identify with the humble woman, we more often imitate the attitude of Simon the Pharisee. We are quick to admit we are not perfect, but we also are quick to point out that no one is. And we do so not to establish the teaching of Scripture that "we are by nature sinful and unclean", but rather to establish to ourselves and others that while we may be a sinner, we are not a *bad* sinner. I do some things that are bad, but at least I'm not tempted by pornography. Those only tempted by pornography look down at those who have committed adultery with their bodies. Those who have committed adultery but only once at least have not committed it as much as others have. There's always someone to paint as worse. And so we will admit to the general abstract concept of our sinfulness, but when it comes to admitting specific wrongdoing, and showing repentance for clear

violations of God's holy commandments, then we hesitate, and our pride comes to the fore. We will admit to small sins and stand in church and recite with the congregation "I confess that I have sinned against Your divine majesty in thought, word and deed". But to stand as an individual before your parent, your child, your spouse, your coworker, your fellow member, your pastor and say, "What I did was clearly wrong. It was sinful, I have no excuse, and I am sorry," that often strikes us as too much humility. Too abasing. Out come the reasons and excuses for our actions. Out come the accusations: "Who do you think you are, accusing me? Don't you know what that person has done to me? Don't you know how hard my life is? Don't you know what I've been through? And now you want me to humiliate myself with an apology? Not a chance!"

One of the points of Jesus' parable, perhaps the most important point, is to show how prideful that attitude really is, and how it fails to understand just how offensive sin is in the eyes of God. We like to think the difference between me and a "real" sinner is like the difference between a debt of \$100 and \$1 million. Really, says Jesus, its more like the difference between owing \$1 billion and \$1 trillion. One is 100 times larger than the other, but does it really matter, since you can't repay either one? So it is with our sin. To say "Sure, I'm not perfect. I'm a "sinner" in the broadest definition of that word, but I only commit small sins and I balance it out with some good"; it is like me committing a murder and then saying to the victim's family, "Yeah, you're right, I'm not a perfect person. But when you think about it, is what I did really so bad? I mean, you need to

understand I have a temper. Besides, I only killed one person. Abortionists kill millions of children. So if an apology will help, 'I'm Sorry.' There, you have your apology. Here, I even got you a small gift to show you I'm not so bad. Now can you just get over it?"

That is what God hears when we come to Him in confession with the attitude, "I'm not so bad. Nobody's perfect. Besides, I come to church, I put some money in the offering plate, I do some stuff around the church. What more do you want?" So

What Are You Offering Jesus?

Are you offering your pride? As the answer to your sin do you offer the arrogant attitude that you are somehow more worthy of God's grace than others? As you give your offerings to God do you think to yourself how generous you are, how God should be grateful that you give as much as you do, especially considering how you could be using your money? Are you offering to God the attitude of looking down on those around you, belittling them with gossip and the refusal of your kindness or forgiveness? Do you continue to comfort yourself by saying, I sin, but not that much?

Or with that woman will you offer your repentance? Better than that Pharisee she knew what kind of woman, what kind of person she was, she knew the immensity of her debt of sin, but she did not approach Christ on her reputation, but His. She was a sinner, but Jesus is the savior of sinners. She owed

much, but Christ would repay it all. Here is the One who would redeem her, and like St. Paul, she is amazed that God should do this for her, the chief of sinners.

We too, know the immensity of our sin. It weighs on us as it did on the sinful woman. But unlike the Pharisee, she knew what to do with her sin. She confessed it. She repented of it. She looked to the Lamb of God who would take away her sin. She understood what Luther would later write, “[In the Gospel, God speaks to us and says], ‘Your sin can only live in two places: either it is with you and lies on your neck, then you are doomed; or it lies on Christ, then you are free and are saved; which do you prefer?’ ” We, like that Pharisee, often want to try and carry some of that burden ourselves and pat ourselves on the back for how much more worthy we are than others.

God would have us place our sin on His Lamb. He has already completed our salvation; He neither wants nor needs our help. Through confession and repentance He wishes us to accept His gift.

I read a story once about a man who one day received a phone call from his son who was grown and living away with a family of his own, who started out by saying, “Dad, I’m sorry.” The father didn’t understand, and asked, “Sorry for what?” And the son replied, “Well, I spent the day re-tiling the kitchen floor, and my five-year old son insisted on helping through the entire project. It made me think of all the times I helped you while growing up, and so I thought I should call up and apologize.”

As Christians, we often have the opinion that by doing good works we can show to God and the world that we are worthy of His love. In truth, such an attitude is a subtle form of works righteousness. We do not make ourselves worthy of God's grace. By definition, grace is that love given to those who do not deserve it. God has made us worthy of His love through His Baptism and His forgiveness. When we try and earn it or even try and show to God how worthy we are of it, we are as helpful as a five-year old helping with a retiling project. God does not desire our help. He wants our faith in that love He has shown us in His Son, that Christ may declare to us as He did to that woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Gloria Patri...

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