

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Luke 7:36-8:3

Title: “The Outsiders: The Humble”

One of the things I find is a constant challenge in my own life is the tendency to make judgements about other people. It's so easy and so natural, sometimes we don't even realize we are doing it. Back in the day when I was dean of a canoe camp in our conference out of Camp Kinawind near Gaylord, the folks I had recruited as adult volunteers stood with me near the registration area—as we did each year--as the campers filed through the line on a Sunday afternoon. We watched. One young man in that line was tall, black, but the most distinctive thing about him was that on the back of his head he had his name shaved in his hair: “Mario”. I watched as he filed through the line and – shamefully -- was thinking that I hoped he wasn't one of our campers. He looked like trouble, looked like an inner city gang member. In my head were the stories told by fellow camp deans who have experienced a few children and youth with behavioral problems. Parents have been known to send them to church camp with the hopes of getting them straightened out. I stood there with my thoughts whirling as Mario made his way through the line.

We all do this sort of thing. We do judge books by their covers, and so it should come as no surprise that Jesus encountered this same judgmental tendency in someone with whom he was having dinner, a Pharisee named Simon. As the Gospel According to Luke has it...

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited ... [Jesus] ... saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.”

⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.”

“Teacher,” he replied, “speak.”

⁴¹ “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?”

⁴³ Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.”

And Jesus^[e] said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

⁴⁸ Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

So I know -- and I'm guessing you do too -- how the Pharisee in this story of Jesus came to look at this woman who had barged in on his dinner with Jesus. They were reclined in the custom of Middle Eastern dining, around the low table, lying on their sides with one elbow buried in the soft cushions. Talking. Eating.

Like a wedding crasher, she came in uninvited. When she saw Jesus, tears came to her eyes, not the kind that merely fill the eye but never spill out, but the kind of weeping that empties the eyes, the kind of weeping that forces the shoulders to heave. (It was the kind of weeping I've witnessed in a spouse who learns her husband is going to die soon.) Uncontrollable. Involuntary. Except in the case of this woman the tears were not brought on by grief, but by joy and gratitude.

As those tears began to pour from her eyes, she bowed to Jesus' feet. It's an expression of profound humility for her to assume this posture. She had to get down on her hands and knees in order to wipe his feet with her hair. Makes her completely vulnerable. While the host sat there thinking what trouble she is, she removed the bonnet that held her hair up and wiped those

feet she had dampened. As Simon, the host, grumbled to himself, “Not only is this an inconvenience and a great intrusion, but this woman has no right even to be here and didn’t he know how dirty she was?”, she took the faintly yellowed stone flask and poured its perfumed contents on his feet and massaged the ointment into the skin until the whole room was filled with its scent, like walking into a scented candle shop or like the basement of the church this week after Hammer Restoration sprayed pleasant smelling disinfecting solution all over.

Simon, the man known for his religiosity, the man who studied his Torah every day, lay there. Lips pursed. Eyes hard, obviously unaffected by this show of emotion. Unable to get beyond what he thinks he knows about her. No matter how humbly she comes to Jesus, Simon cannot get past his initial judgements of her and his hardened heart keeps him from appreciating that somehow this profound expression of gratitude reveals that she has been transformed from whatever it was that led him to call her a sinner.

This Gospel account never does tell us what exactly her sin was about. Traditionally, interpreters have assumed she was a prostitute, but other scholars say the Greek is ambiguous. She could have been one of many peasants who were overwhelmingly in debt and therefore treated poorly. Maybe she committed adultery once and the rumors flew around town. Maybe she was alcoholic, an abusive mother, who knows? Whatever it was, Simon had strong feelings that this should not be happening, that if Jesus was the man of God people were saying he was, he would not let this woman—this outsider and sinner-- come near him let alone touch him.

An 84-year-old woman who was shopping at the mall one day. As she made her way back toward her car in the parking lot she was terrified to see two strange teenage boys sitting in her front seat. They had cranked up the stereo and were rocking away without a care in the world.

For a split second she thought about screaming for help, but decided instead to reach into her purse, pull out a handgun, walk over, open the driver’s side door, pointed the gun at the teenagers and said, “You get out of this car right now, and I don’t want to see you stop running!”

The boys, scared out of their wits, got out of the car as quickly as they could and ran as fast as they could without looking back.

The woman, recovering her composure, slid behind the wheel, took a couple of deep breaths to slow her rapidly beating heart. Put the key in the ignition. It didn’t work. The car belonged to the boys. (Imagining a Church in the Spirit, Johnson and McDonald, p.127)

What we sometimes think we see in other people can sometimes be in error. When it comes to Simon, he does not see what Jesus sees when it comes to this woman. The text doesn’t put Jesus’ parable in this context, but I can imagine Jesus preaching somewhere before this occurred and this woman standing in the crowd. He doesn’t know her, but she’s there and he talks of God as one who forgives sin as a creditor forgives the debts of two people. One person owes \$320,000, the other \$3,200. The man calls them to his office and says to the one with the greater debt, “Look I know you’re working very hard to pay this and from what it looks like, you’re barely making the minimum payment each month. At this rate, you’ll never pay this debt. So I want to give you the money. You’re debt free as far as I’m concerned.” To the one with the lesser debt, “And while I’m feeling generous, I’ll let you off the hook for the \$3,200 you owe me, too.”

How would you feel if your banker called and said, “Look, I know you worry a lot about

this and money always seems tight, seems like you'll never get this paid, so I'm just going to write off your mortgage or your car loan or your credit card debt. You're free and clear. Don't send us another payment."?) How would it feel to be released from a burden that keeps you awake at night, whether of debt or sin?

As she listens, her eyes begin to fill because she's not been feeling too positive about herself lately. She's done some things of which she's not very proud. And somehow to hear that God generously forgives, eased the hard tensions she'd felt. And the tears just came, to hear that God doesn't share the same hard judgment of her neighbors, that God values her in spite of the wrong she's done.

I sometimes wonder if those of us who have been raised in the church—like me--don't know what it's like to NOT have a life-giving relationship with God through Christ, and so we easily slip into Simon's posture. Have we forgotten or maybe never known what it means to be transformed through the kind of forgiveness Jesus is giving this dinner crashing woman because we have always been blessed by having been born into the church? Maybe we've been forgiven the lesser debt and along with Simon find it difficult to appreciate just what it is that this woman is experiencing and why she is there in his house making such a scene. Do we along with Simon miss the power of what Jesus knows is happening with this woman?

This story of Jesus' grace makes me think about Mario over and over again. As the two volunteers and I watched Mario move through the line, we talked quietly, wondering who our kids would be. Sure enough as Mario stepped up to the registrar, he shared his name and the registrar pointed over to us. He was one of ours for the week. And I thought to myself, "Serves me right for thinking that way", and I meant it. Sometimes I think God puts people in my path to challenge my own sinful thinking. He came over, introduced himself, and throughout that week of canoeing and camping on the Black River we came to know him. The first thing we discovered was that Mario had never been camping before, and he didn't realize he needed to pay attention to the packing sheet included with his pre-camp materials. That coupled with the fact that his family was not very well off. He had no idea how cold it gets mid-summer in northern Michigan woods along a riverbank. All he brought was a blanket. He didn't even bring a long-sleeved sweatshirt or a plate or bowl for meals. And it was clear early on that he was scared to death to be there. But he came because his girlfriend had asked him to come. You see she was afraid too. Two inner city kids plunging themselves into their first camping experience by canoeing a remote river with strangers. What faith!! What faith!!

By the time our week was over, those first impressions of this lanky teenager with the strange hair had been completely erased by the truth of who he was: a gentle, sensitive, soft-spoken, hardworking young man with a great sense of humor and a loving heart. He was a humble outsider loved by God for who he was that had nothing to do with his hair or his look. I remember Mario as one who taught me that sometimes we are just too hard on people based on internal judgments we make, and that irrespective of my self-righteousness, God loves with abandon and forgives those who come in humble gratitude. It's not about perfection with God. That's what Jesus reveals about God over and over again. Being loved and accepted by God is not about perfection.

On the ChristianityToday.com site, Matt Donnelly wrote:

A quest for perfection gets in the way of many people coming to Jesus. Some have the mistaken impression that God only saves perfect people who don't need any "editing". So instead of coming to Jesus for healing, they try to do their own "editing" in their own strength. But just as a novel can never be its best without outside help, so a person can never become his or her best without Jesus. ...God loves to work with first drafts. In fact, he doesn't work with anything else.

I imagine the woman coming to Jesus was in that place, the place that assumed God worked with Pharisaic perfection and not with her dawdling inadequacies and religious deficiencies. But to hear Jesus tell it, God works with debtors who owe a lot as well as those who owe a little. And those who owe a lot, according to the parable, may have the capacity to love more, and it began to change her heart. So when she barged in on Simon's dinner, she came out of gratitude for the gift Jesus had already provided. The gift of being loved and accepted by God in spite of how her neighbors had spurned her.

And then, of course, there's Simon, whose love is stunted by his inability to see in her what God values and loves. Somehow his judgment of her closes off his ability to love her and be open to what it is God's Spirit has already given her: a humble, grateful child of God who has been transformed by forgiveness.

I love this story of Jesus who consistently broke out of that way of holding people in his mind without the kind of immediate judgement by which we sometimes categorize people. He was able to see what was genuine and authentic in people and celebrate the good in people. He could see through the exterior masks we sometimes wear. He didn't get stuck on the strange haircut or the rumored sin of a woman or even the hard heart of a faithful religious man. The living Christ of God holds all of us in higher esteem than we sometimes hold each other or even ourselves. Jesus knows the good and celebrates that. And as those who follow Jesus' Way, we are called to do the same. Go and do likewise!