

Love Knows No Limits

Luke 7:36 – 8:3

June 13, 2010

Our Scripture reading today comes from the 7th and 8th chapter of Luke's gospel. Listen know for the reading of God's Word for the people of God.

Luke 7:36 – 50

³⁶Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

⁴⁸Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Luke 8:1 – 3

¹After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ²and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, give us wisdom to perceive you, intellect to understand you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you and life to proclaim you, through the power of the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Benedict, 489-543

As I begin this morning, I am tempted to ask the question, “Have you ever experienced prejudice?” Of course, I am equally tempted to avoid such a question, because I would have to say with all honesty that I already know the answer to my question. But regardless of the anticipated response, isn’t the question worth investigating? So I ask, “Have you ever experienced prejudice?” “Have you ever been the victim of isolation or rejection based on nothing more than who you are; be it black or white, protestant or agnostic, thin or overweight, short or tall, male or female, rich or poor, gay or straight?” I think far too often we get accustomed to being the source of someone’s rejection that we find this sort of action to be the norm. It is simply the way things are, so to speak. We live in a world of rules, standards and moral/cultural norms that we come to accept as customary and so we carry on about our day as if we are powerless to do anything about it. We simply tolerate the intolerance of others and I am not sure that this is the way that any of us should be living, regardless of the standard by which we are measured.

But let us not forget our own prejudices, shall we. Just as we are seemingly powerless against our own victimization, we too dish out our own since of bigotry and marginalization. The lady in front of us at the grocery checkout pays with food stamps and instantly we make judgment about her. Not only is she slowing down our day by making us wait an extra three (3) minutes as she pays for her groceries but she also happens to be Hispanic and the mother of four. Can you imagine what must be going through our minds at this point? If the word “Mexican” enters your mind at this point then you should be alarmed, because you have just passed

judgment on an individual you don't even know. Her circumstances are her own, not yours and the details of the burdens of her life are hers to carry, not yours to judge.

I say all this to remind each of you that regardless of whether or not we are the one portraying the victim or marginalizing those around us, we must always remember to stop and ask ourselves, "Where is God in all of this?" I had an opportunity this week to visit with Bud in the hospital and as we were talking he said that he was amazed at the number of individuals in who were suffering in our local community; people are dying, others are experiencing cancer and disease diagnosis, some have lost their jobs and still others are experiencing rejection from their communities, their families and even their faith communities. "Where is God in all of this?" The concern that Bud brought to my attention is one that has been on my mind for quite some time; years actually. Why is it that there is so much pain amongst us? In wrestling with this concern I have come to realize that the pain and suffering has always been there but our since of awareness has been heightened. Why? Because as a chosen people of God we are called to carry the burdens of one another and we are by the power of the Holy Spirit which lives within each of us made aware of the pain and suffering of those around us. It isn't that the world has changed; it is that we have changed. We are not necessarily able to do anything about the actual source of the suffering of those we come to know and love, but we are given the ability to comfort those around us with the good news promise of Christ's enduring love.

You have each had an opportunity to hear me speak of my sister and her amazing ability to challenge me with her questions and insightful inquiries. This past Friday she told me of a situation in our family one individual had been hurt by another and they are currently no longer on speaking terms. "Where is God in all of this?" People are hurting, there is an amazing rise in unemployment, oil in the gulf coast is spilling out of the earth in amounts that are

incomprehensible to many of us and here we have a father and a son who are no longer speaking to one another because of a misunderstanding that I am sure could easily be remedied by a few comforting words of encouragement. “Where is God in all of this?”

When we allow *standards* to replace *acceptance* in human relationships the ability to foster and nurture *relationship* is destroyed. Worldly standards are nothing more than an artificial means by which mankind measures the success of others. There is little wiggle room built in and the inability to obtain the highest marks of these standards creates limits on those who are being measured. These standards should not be the “be all end all” but rather should serve as a means for us to aspire to. In a study released this past week it was reported that people are happier as they are working towards a goal than when they are once they have reached it. As Christians, I believe that many of us have forgotten this. It is our work here on Earth that inspires us, enriches our lives and nurtures us as we work to obtain the standards of being Jesus to a lost and dying world; not in obtaining worldly standards. The standards of Christ are more, if not entirely so, about acceptance, forgiveness and yes, Michael, even tolerance of those who do not live up to those worldly standards that so many of us have learned to blindly embrace.

Unfortunately, we have a long history in our society, and sadly even in the church, of alienating people, of excluding people, because they don’t measure up to someone’s standards. In society in general, and specifically in the church, such a focus on artificial standards and merit systems has always led to divisions and dead-ends. By example of the teachings of Christ, we should embrace the mantra that true acceptance creates for each of us a call to action; an action fostered through Christ’s radically inclusive message of love.

For this reason, today’s text is wonderfully freeing, if not downright shocking. Today’s reading frees us from the need to meet anyone’s worldly standards and likewise to hold anyone

up to ours. We are not called to meet the expectations of those around us and we certainly should not feel compelled to call others to live meet our own misguided expectations. Are we startled by this revelation? Of course we are. For us to hear and to embrace this reality is difficult for us because our communities, our families and even our churches have become too preoccupied with applying laws, commandments, rules, standards, merits and judgments based entirely on our own interpretation of what we believe to be true rather than on the simple inclusive message of Christ. “Where is God in all of this?” Listen again to what happens in our text and see if you can figure out what exactly is going on.

There is a dinner party. People have been invited. Jesus is reclining on a couch at table (the common Roman practice for freedmen). Suddenly an uninvited guest comes in. She is a woman with a reputation, a local prostitute, known by others in the room. She follows a common practice of a lower servant class, not only washing Jesus’ feet which are dusty from walking with sandals on dirt roads, but washing them with her perfume and drying them with her hair. (Prof. Dr. David Zersen, President Emeritus | Concordia University at Austin | Austin, Texas)

Imagine yourself for just a moment as the host of this dinner party having to deal with this invasion. How in the world do you keep deal with such an unwelcomed guest? Oddly, enough, however, Jesus suggests that this woman has more of a right to be there than many others do, and he has an unusual reason for suggesting so. He explains this to the host Simon by telling a story of two people in debt who had their debts forgiven, and asks Simon which of the two debtors, the one with a large amount forgiven or the one with a small amount forgiven, would be more appreciative of the moneylender’s erasure of their debt. You can almost hear the

since of obviousness in Simon's voice as he responds with, "uh, duh, the one who had the bigger debt cancelled, of course." "Right you are," Jesus tells him. "And equally as obvious, this woman has had more sins forgiven of her than many others and so she is being extravagant with her love." She appreciates her forgiveness and, therefore, she "belongs"; that is at least in any society of which Jesus is a part.

What do you think is really going on in this story? Is it merely a story of acceptance or can you since the call to action that love demands of us? It's a striking lesson for Simon, but also for all of us, about the importance of acknowledging the source of love and in turn acting on it. Simon hadn't yet made the discovery. To Simon, Jesus was merely another guest, no one of great importance. As a result, he didn't wash Jesus' feet, greet him with a kiss, and put oil on his head, all of which were standard courtesies to be expected from a host for special guests. Simon wasn't motivated by Jesus to set him apart as anything special. Simon knew the rules, but knowing standards, laws, principles, and right behavior never motivates us. This woman, who apparently had previously heard Jesus speak about God's extravagant kindness, who had heard the radically inclusive message of love and complete forgiveness that Jesus had offered her, couldn't help but share the love within her in the only way she knew how. She had found and acknowledged the source of love and it made all the difference in the world to her. God's acceptance of her had created love in action.

Sometimes people think that words and concepts don't make any difference, that in the Church we are all about the same thing, trying to be good in the hope that God will be good to us. We far too often assume that we are about rules and standards and morals and merits and as a result, we find ourselves applying these same standards to people who don't measure up so

they can be excluded; be put on the outside by those of us who inhabit the inside. But this isn't what at all what Christ message is all about.

The shocking thing about this story, however, is that words and concepts do make a difference, all the difference in the world. The good news of God's love for us alone can and should transform us. The simple recognition that God is so kind that the love offered to each us covers our every shortcoming and our every fault alone can make us new. If such extravagant kindness is understood and accepted by us, if we have seen and understood it to be expressed at the cross and empty tomb, then why should we expect it to do any less for each of us in our own daily lives?

One impact that such understanding can have for us is to insure that the invited guest lists at our dinner parties, however metaphorical they may be, do not show us to be condescending, prejudiced, or self-righteous in nature. In our social gatherings and organizations, in our classrooms and places of business, in our homes and especially within our communities of faith, there can be no exclusive circles; only inclusive ones.

For us, embracing the seemingly less important, as defined by the world, is an important call in our lives; a call given to us through the love that God has shown each and every one of us. There is no one to whom we can rise above because we are all equally loved by God. There is no one to whom we should condescend. If we truly come to accept and know that with all our shortcomings and failures there exists a love great enough to accept even us, then it should be through this same knowledge that we also come to know that somewhere, very close to each of us, there are feet waiting to be washed. Amen.