

Grace and Gratitude

Theme: The extent of our gratitude comes in direct proportion to the awareness of our need for forgiveness.

Text: Luke 7:36-50, A Christmas Eve message

This afternoon most of us will gather with family and friends around a well stocked table and most likely at some point regret the amount of food we consume. I have humorous memories of my family stretched out on the living room floor moaning and groaning in pain over our bloated stomachs. My guess is that before we dive into all that is on the table before us, our host will ask us hold our appetites a few more minutes while we each share something for which we are grateful. I trust that it will not be too difficult to find something to share. We will hear things like “I am thankful for my health”, “We thank God for his abundant provisions”; “It is a privilege to live in a country that affords us freedom...”; a snickering sibling might force out appreciation for a brother or sister... You know how this goes. It is good and right to mix food and festivities with gratitude and thanksgiving. It has happened since time immemorial that we gather around a meal in order to celebrate.

On this Thanksgiving Day I want us to join another meal to which Jesus was invited. It is at this meal that we will find the deepest reason for gratitude. **Grace and Gratitude.** This meal is the setting for a drama that unfolds. The great British novelist and theologian, Dorothy Sayers, coined the phrase, “*The dogma is the drama.*” By that she meant that good theology well told contains within it a dramatic story. In the incident into which we are going to enter we could say that the dogma or the teaching is found in the drama. Here is dogma in the drama: *The extent of our gratitude comes in direct proportion to the awareness of our need for forgiveness.*

Let’s read together responsively Luke 7:36-50

Luke is a good story teller, for he quickly sets the scene and introduces us to the main characters. Simon, the Pharisee is the host at this dinner party and as we shall see fails to extend the kind of graciousness to a guest that would be expected of a host in hospitality society, such as the Middle East. [You can’t truly understand this story until you realize that what occurs is governed by Middle Eastern customs of hospitality.] The wanton woman is the party crasher who fawns all over Jesus, much to the indignation of Simon, but to the delight of Jesus. Jesus, the protagonist, is under the scrutiny of Simon. Jesus has the temerity to be a rude guest by criticizing the bad manners of his host even while offering forgiveness to a woman of ill repute.

Let me see if I can paint the picture of the scene so that we can step into the room with Jesus, Simon and the woman. Entertainment was a public affair in the Middle East. A wealthy person’s home, such as Simon’s, was built around an open courtyard. Imagine his house in the shape of a horseshoe, hollow in the center. Even though there would have been guest list for this banquet, the public would have easy access through the courtyard to the eating hall. This open space both explains the effortless entry of the

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woman, and probably the presence of other members of the public who had followed Jesus into Simon's house. In v. 36 we are told that they *"reclined at table."* This is not the kind of table that you will be sitting around this afternoon. Imagine a long, low table perhaps 18 inches off the ground. The guests are stretched out on a low couch. Having left their sandals at the door, their feet were positioned behind them since they were considered the unclean parts of their bodies. This explains how the woman could come up behind Jesus.

As with all good dramas there must be a conflict, clash between good and evil. It is just that Jesus changes the labels of what is considered good and what is considered evil. The one who thinks he is good, is, in fact, revealed to be prideful and ungrateful. The one who is considered immoral by worldly standards, is the embodiment of grace and gratitude.

Let's see how Jesus interacts with both Simon and the woman, and how He leads us to the connection between grace and gratitude.

Simon, the Pharisee

We quickly get insight into the rudeness of Simon, the Pharisee, who lacked the hospitality which would have been expected of a host in the Middle East. In contrast to the woman, Jesus said that Simon didn't do three things that he should have done: (1) Jesus says, *"I came into your house. You did not give me water for my feet"* (v. 44) Palestine is a dust bowl. It was customary to wear open sandals. So it was common courtesy for a host to either provide water for a guest to bathe his feet or instruct the servants to do so. (2) Secondly, a kiss of greeting would be the expected expression of welcome. *"You did not give me a kiss"* (v. 45). Equals would kiss each other on the cheek. In a highly class conscious society as is the Middle East, an inferior would kiss the hand of the superior. A student would kiss the hand of a rabbi, a son would do the same with his father. No greeting was offered. (3) Finally, a drop or two of scented olive oil on the head was a means of refreshment from one's travel. Jesus said to Simon, *"You did not put oil on my head"* (v. 46).

We have similar courtesies that we observe almost unconsciously in our society when someone arrives at our home. This afternoon when our guests arrive, as the host I will open the door and say something like, *"Welcome to our home, so glad you could come."* Depending upon how close I am to the person I will reach out and either shake their hand or offer an embrace. Then I will ask if I can take their coat, and hang it up in the nearby closet. This is followed by an offer of refreshment. *"What can I get you to drink?"* I will then state the options. A fire will be going in the fire place so that we can gather in a warm environment and enjoy a conversation. I will invite our guests to have a seat and enjoy some of the hors d'oeuvres. If I omit any of these amenities, the conversation that our guests have in the car on the way home would be quite interesting to listen in on.

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Against this backdrop, Simon's slight is all the more intensified. His omissions were an obvious snub. Simon's withholding of customary graciousness was an expression of his self-righteous and condemnatory spirit. Luke writes this almost like a Shakespearean soliloquy. There are times in Shakespeare's plays when a main character will turn to the audience in order to give you his inner most thoughts. "When the Pharisee who had invited him [Jesus] saw this [the woman's display of affection], 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" (v. 39).

Righteousness for a Pharisee meant quite simply to have nothing to do with anyone or anything that was unrighteous. The word Pharisee means "separated ones." This was the lens through which Simon viewed Jesus. Jesus couldn't possibly be a prophet of God. Prophets had the ability to see through or discern. He apparently did not know that this woman's reputation. Certainly she was well known to everyone else as a sinner, which most likely means she was a prostitute. Jesus defiled himself by allowing this woman to touch him, which means her filth was transferred to him.

Of course, the Pharisees were on a morally superior ground. They had kept their ways pure. Their world was divided into greater and lesser. Simon built himself up by belittling those who did not pursue the higher life with the same zeal. Simon demonstrated equal disdain for the woman and for Jesus.

There is no greater enemy of gratitude, than pride or a subtle sense of superiority. It is truly an insidious encroachment on our spirit. We begin to think we are making progress in this Christian life, and start judging others for not taking it as seriously as we do. No one has ever caught the distinction between spiritual pride and humility in my mind better than Jonathan Edwards, the great 18th century theologian and pastor during the First Great Awakening.

"Spiritual pride is very apt to suspect others; whereas a humble saint is most jealous of himself, he is so suspicious of nothing in the world as he is of his own heart. The spiritually proud person is apt to find fault with other saints, that they are low in grace; and to be much in observance of how cold and dead they are; and being quick to discern and take notice of their deficiencies. But the eminently humble Christian has so much to do at home...that he is not apt to be very busy with other hearts...

Simon thought pretty highly of himself. He carried the banner and upheld the moral standards of the religious community. God was fortunate to have someone as upstanding as he is.

The Woman

The contrast between Simon and the unnamed woman could not be more stark. Simon was withholding, the woman was lavish in her gracious display of affection. The woman found out where Jesus was and along with others stood

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behind the couches on which the invited guests were reclining. “When 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, and as she stood 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” (v. 37-38).

The woman did everything that Simon refused to do. She did what the host in Middle Eastern society should have done. (1) Simon provided no water, whereas the women’s tears became the water to cleanse Jesus feet. She noticed the lack of courtesy that Simon had offered Jesus, so she became the servant. The towel to wipe Jesus’ feet was her hair. The crowning glory of a woman was her hair. But once she was married, her hair would never be let down in public, only in the company of her husband. So overwhelmed was the woman with gratitude, she couldn’t have cared less that others thought this act shameful. (2) She offered the greeting of a kiss that Simon had withheld. It would have been improper for a woman to kiss Jesus on the cheek, so she does the unprecedented as a sign of indebtedness, she kisses his washed feet. She knew she was unworthy of his love and yet had already experienced it. (3) Finally, she anoints him not with cheap olive oil that was very prevalent, but the expensive perfume that hung in an alabaster flask around her neck. If she was a prostitute, it was what she would use to be nicely scented for her clients.

The woman couldn’t do enough for Jesus. She was out of control with this public display of affection. All inhibitions were lost. She did not care that she was making a scene as an unwelcome intruder into a highly proper Pharisee’s house. All the “ha-rumph” and disgust in the world could not keep her from this lavish exhibition of affection. And Jesus accepts it all without a hint of embarrassment or apology. In fact, he is quite comfortable with her attention.

The Difference Between Simon and The Woman

What accounts for the difference for this wildly contrasting response to Jesus? Simon, the Pharisee, withholds and the woman gushes. The Pharisee is hardened in judgment and the woman is soft with gratitude.

After witnessing the Pharisee’s lack of graciousness as a host and reading his heart of judgment toward the woman, Jesus sets about to draw attention to this contrast.

“Jesus answered him, ‘Simon, I have something tell you’ (v. 40). This is a Hebrewism for: “I have some blunt words for you and you are not going to like them.”

“Tell me, teacher’, Simon said” (v. 40b). At least displaying some respect by addressing Jesus as teacher.

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

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled” (v. 43a).

“You have judged correctly’, Jesus said” (v. 43b).

Now on the surface we might conclude that Jesus message to Simon might be, “Simon, you are a righteous man and your sins are few. Thus very little is required to cover your debt, whereas as this woman has many sins and of course, she loves more, because she has been forgiven more.”

Is that Jesus’ message to Simon? No, I believe Jesus is saying, you hide behind your superficial moralism. You have taken the ethical high ground and look down upon this woman as if you have earned a special place in the heart of God. Your sin is that you have no contrition or awareness of your need. You don’t think you have much to be forgiven for.

Up to this point I have been pretty hard on Simon. But before we too quickly dismiss him as a caricature, we must admit that there is a lot of Simon in many of us. In comparison to others we think we have led a pretty clean life. Others have brought shame on themselves for lifestyles of addiction of whatever kind, marital infidelity or sexual impurity, violation of the law, etc. The worst thing I have done is gotten a speeding ticket, and had to go to traffic school. I can see how this woman would feel tremendous gratitude for she had much for which to be forgiven and I never have experienced to this gutter to glory life.

The sin of Simon is ours. Our outward behavior is not where we need to look, but shine the searchlight within and do a deeper inventory. As long as we measure ourselves on the basis of what we have not done, then we can say well, I haven’t... [fill in the blank] Then we can easily grade a curve, find those more pitiable than we and feel quite good about ourselves. But if we examine our hearts against the qualities that the Lord would want to grow in them, such as compassion, which is to go out to those who have not had the privilege of knowing the Lord I do, or sharing the opportunities I have, then we are starting to get in touch with the coldness that had taken over Simon.

This is why Jesus turns away from the Simon and to the woman and says to him, “Do you see this woman (v. 44) Do you really see this woman? Is she just an object of derision to you? Is she simply a foil to justify your own self-righteousness? Is she just a means to discredit my ministry? Do you see this woman? Jesus says to us, do you see the brokenness in this world. Do you see the lives fallen along the way? Do you? What we see is an indication of the state of our heart and our ability to see our own need. ...I tell you, her many sins have

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been forgiven—for she loved much. But he has been forgiven little (or thinks he has little to be forgiven for) loves little” (v. 47)

Then Jesus said to her before everyone gathered, “Your sins are forgiven” (v. 48). This was just a public acknowledgement of what she had already experienced previously from Jesus because she certainly would not have displayed what she did if forgiveness had not already been received.

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True gratitude flows from the awareness of our need for grace. Sometimes this gratitude flows because the Lord has rescued our lives from lifestyles that were heading to destruction. Perhaps the reason that the hymn “Amazing Grace” is the most popular hymn ever been written is its theme of grace. “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, and now am found, was blind, but now I see”, wrote John Newton, who said that he never wanted to forget that he was “once an infidel and libertine, a servant (or trader) of slaves in Africa. St. Augustine was a notorious womanizer before he was chased into the arms of Christ and described gratitude as “*alleluia from head to foot.*”

The great reformer Martin Luther came to understand the breakthrough of grace more out of a lifestyle of Simon than the woman. He joined the Augustinian priesthood because of his desire to please God. Luther thought righteousness was something of his own doing. He practically killed himself in his attempt to live a pure life. He became obsessed with confession. He appeared daily before his Father Confessor with the slightest item. In Luther’s own words, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, readings, and other works.” Yet Luther found only torment in his attempt to make himself right before God. When was enough enough?

Thinking that God’s righteousness was his wrath and anger, to Luther God was only to be feared. Then he came to understand that God’s righteousness is, in fact, his gift of grace and mercy received only by faith in Jesus Christ. When that truth dawned on him he says, “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” Luther describes his experience in theological language, “If you have a true faith that Christ is your savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This is to behold God in faith, that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart in which there is neither anger nor ungraciousness.”

Throughout Luther’s life, once this discovery was made, he never ceased to marvel that God had accepted him, poor and wretched human being that he was. So the last words that Luther scribbled on his deathbed were, “We are only beggars; that is true.” So

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whether you have led a life more like the woman, or more like Simon; it makes no difference, “We are only beggars, that is true.”

So when we gather around our tables this afternoon, prepared to hastily dive into the spread prepared for us and we are asked to pause and give thanks, it is certainly right to recite all the bounty that has come from the hand of God, since all good and perfect gifts come from him. But let’s pause and take a deeper breath and say, “We are beggars, we are the woman in need of the covering of Christ’s forgiveness, for without it, we would stand condemned, undeserving of any favor from God. We are Simon whose hearts readily grow cold because we have erected a barrier of outward goodness that has separated us from God’s heart for the world. ”

May the deepest rush of gratitude flood us with an overwhelming appreciation of grace.