

“The Tale of Two Sinners”

- In both mine and Katy’s family, Katy and I have a deal with our siblings around Christmas
 - The deal is: if you don’t buy us a gift, we won’t buy you one.
 - This truce has been in effect for many years
 - It has saved us the cost and trouble of buying what would probably be frivolous gifts for one another
 - You know, the kind you “regift”- the truce saves us from such things
 - Katy and I share the same agreement- we do not buy each other gifts just because it is a holiday or an anniversary
 - I can remember even when we were dating low these many years ago, the feeling that Valentine’s day was a little forced and artificial
 - We would much rather enjoy a nice dinner and bottle of wine together
 - If a gift is purchased and given, it is not because it is a certain time of year, but because we wanted to buy it for some one
 - If you have ever been in a truce such as this, you know it is a delicate one
 - Because if at any point one person breaks down and buys a gift at Christmas, or at a birthday, or Valentine’s Day
 - Then the other person will have nothing to give.
 - There can be no reciprocation, and then you are left in limbo about next year: is the truce back on again, or should I go shopping?
 - Last year, my brother bought Katy and me a small gift for Christmas.
 - The gift given, the truce broken... what am I to do next year?
- Taking front and center in our gospel reading this morning is this very thing: an surprise gift
 - It was a gift given without warning- freely, with no expectation of reciprocity.
 - But it’s not the one we immediately see
 - At this point in Luke’s gospel, Jesus finds himself eating dinner at the house of a Pharisee named Simon

- While some Pharisees seem to find Jesus intolerable, and eventually conspire in his arrest
- There are others who are intrigued and want to discuss Jesus' teachings further
- Jesus is, after all, doing many amazing things in their midst
- This is the third week now where we are hearing almost a continual reading of Luke's gospel
- The Centurion's slave being healed
- The widow's son being brought back to life
- It is not surprising that one of the religious leaders and devout Jews would want to speak to Jesus
- God seems to be at work here through these healings, it's hard to deny, and Simon wants to see it for himself.
- He and Jesus are eating and reclining at the table, enjoying a good meal
- Perhaps they are discussing politics, or finer points of Jewish tradition and law
- And a woman enters the house, somewhat unseen, and surprises Jesus
- Scripture says she stood behind him and began to wash his feet with her tears, and anoint them with perfumed oil
- Luke describes the jar as made from alabaster, indicating that this was a very expensive gift
- People recognized her and she seems to be known as a sinner
- The audacity of such a person to enter the house of a Pharisee and wash the feet of his guest and a prophet is huge
- It was risky- so uncommon for the social norms of the day
- It's a little hard to believe, but we find a similar story in every single Gospel- different settings, different points in Jesus' life
- But the story is basically the same: a woman anoints Jesus-
- Scholars conclude that this likely based in an ancient oral tradition¹
- And as Luke has described the scene, it seems at first that this woman giving Jesus an unexpected gift
- One that might even be a little scandalous, considering her reputation and the intimacy of the gift she brings

¹ Pulpit Fiction Podcast, <http://www.pulpitfiction.us/show-notes/171-proper-6c-june-12-2016>

- But Jesus understands what's really happening- she had been forgiven, her faith had made her whole
- She had received an immeasurable gift from God, the chance to start over and begin again
- And she is only trying to give back, to show some gratitude, in the only way she knows how
- She is a woman of great faith, and this is simply the only way she knows how to respond.
- This inappropriate violation of cultural norms and personal boundaries did not escape the attention of the Pharisee in the room
 - He has spent most of his life learning what is clean and unclean
 - What is sinful and virtuous
 - What is appropriate and what is too edgy
 - Truthfully, even today, the intimacy shared here is usually reserved for significant others, and only the closest of friends
 - Simon says that if only Jesus knew- if Jesus really was a prophet of God he would know, that this woman is trouble
 - Jesus of course does know- knows not only what is in this faithful woman's heart, he sees Simon's heart too²
 - And he tells a parable to make his point
 - He tells of two individuals owing a debt, one small and one large
 - Both are forgiven, and it seems straight forward that the one forgiven a large debt will be more grateful
 - Simon certainly believes that the woman has more to be forgiven
 - Jesus asks- "Simon, do you see this woman?"³
 - The answer is of course he had not seen her
 - He could only see her reputation, what he believed was her sinfulness and worthlessness
 - He looked right through her
 - Jesus points out that in fact she has shown hospitality to him when Simon, the official host, has done nothing⁴
 - To make the comparison even more obvious, she has given Jesus something of great value

² Gregory Anderson Love, *Feasting on the Word* Year C Volume 3, Theological Perspective, 142

³ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/06/do-you-see-this-woman.html>

⁴ Steven J. Kraftchick, *Feasting on the Word* Year C Volume 3, Exegetical Perspective, 143

- While Simon had committed the sin of refusing hospitality by not offering Jesus the common courtesies of the time
- Jesus, in the way that only Jesus can, has subtly made his point that both this Pharisee and this woman were in need of the same forgiveness
- It is the tale of two sinners, only Simon was not aware of it
- The one whom little is forgiven, loves little, Jesus says, perhaps warning Simon that his own sins were still with him.
- While the woman has accepted the gift of forgiveness and faith, and responded in the only way she could
- The same way we might respond to an unexpected gift of great value, when we were not expecting to receive one
- I find it amusing that while Jesus is trying to show Simon, and possibly others in the room
 - That he is in just as much need of forgiveness as this woman
 - That the hierarchy of righteousness just doesn't exist
 - That's a hard thing for good, religious people to accept sometimes
 - Everyone totally misses the point— or maybe they change the subject to something easier to handle
 - You'll notice in the Gospel reading that instead they all get really upset about Jesus pronouncing the forgiveness of sins
 - Never mind the more scandalous point of God having no favorites
 - No one seems to hear what Jesus saying, no one wants to hear what Jesus is saying
 - It is often easier to get upset about something tangential than to stop and take a good look at our own hearts and lives.
 - Certainly easier than truly seeing and encountering the "other" in our midst
- There are those moments, and perhaps this is one of them, that we have the opportunity to see things more clearly
 - To see other people more clearly
 - To see ourselves more clearly
 - To better appreciate this gift we have been given, understanding we were among those forgiven more rather than less
 - Paul writes to the Galatians that it was nothing we had done- not by the works of the law are we made right with God
 - It is through Christ and our faith, or trust, in him
 - It is a gift freely given.

- Salvation is not an exchange- it is not a transaction, where we give something to God and in return God clears the slate
- Instead, we have discovered that God has given us a great gift and we are unprepared and surprised with nothing to give back
- I think once we see ourselves within this parable, and we see that we are no different than these two sinners in this tale
- At times, a Pharisee believing that we have few sins in need of forgiving
- But at others, seeing more clearly, and knowing we are much more like this woman who knows her sins
- Paul says that our only response to such a great and unexpected gift is to accept it, and to give back the only way we can
- To allow the gift of salvation to utterly change us
- And to begin living a life full of gratitude, just like the woman anointing Jesus' feet
- God has given us the gift.
 - The gift of love, and of life, and of forgiveness
 - May we be the kind of people who know just how much has been forgiven
 - And then passes on that gift as people who love just as greatly.

Amen.