

No More, No Less  
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Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
Pentecost III  
June 17, 2007

Think of a time in your life, when you were shown forgiveness and mercy. What was the effect on you? Think of a time when you have shown forgiveness and mercy -- and of what that was like. Now let us think of the Gospel for today and of forgiveness and mercy and Pharisees.

First, Pharisees. The word Pharisee means “separated one. 150 to 200 years before the time of Jesus, a group of Jews came together, separated themselves from others, to resist pressure from the Greeks, who had conquered that part of the world, pressure to assimilate the people of the one God, the Jews, to Greek culture.

They set about developing new traditions and new interpretations of the Law. They fleshed out and sharpened up existing ones – all in order to prevent assimilation and to preserve, sustain and protect the traditional way of life and worship. Scholars agree that the Pharisees, the separated ones, gave the Judaism of their time the greatest of gifts.

By the time of Jesus, Pharisees, at least the ones we read about in our Scriptures, had taken things to the extreme. They had lost sight of why faithful Jews observe all those traditions and obey Law. They had become obsessive about the outward display of piety: what they wore, how they did what they did. Many had become punctilious about minutiae. Moreover, they looked upon those who did not conform to their standards with condescension, even contempt. Simon, the host of the party we have just heard about was one of these Pharisees with an excellent opinion of himself. He knew what was right religion. He knew what real liturgy should look like. He knew a lot about theology. He was an expert in ethics and an authority on the law. And all of this set him apart. Yes, he was separated – and had no need forgiveness and mercy and no inclination to manifest the qualities of forgiveness and mercy to others.

Enter Jesus. The least “separated one” I can imagine. Jesus, who baffled the separated ones, the Pharisees, who offended their sense of order. Who insisted on a messy message that went something like this:

Through me, Jesus, God is saying God loves you just the way you are now. There’s nothing you can do to make God love you more. There’s nothing you can do to make God love you less. If you respond to God’s love through loving God and other people, God is not going to leave you

as you are. You are a mess. God will recreate you, reinvent you, set you free. All the strange quirks, the craziness and mean corners in you are going to go. I can't tell you when, Maybe in one year, maybe in five thousand. And when you are as God intended when God created you, God will not love you one bit more than God does now.

[adapted from Bruce Larson in his commentary on Luke]

This was not only messy. It was untrue from a Pharisee point of view. Everyone who knew the Law could tell perfectly well who deserved God's favor and who did not. But, along came this man saying "deserve" has nothing to do with it. He claimed everyone is invited into a version of life that is more like a great feast than anything else. A great feast here in this life, a great feast in the age to come. A great feast, for which there are no qualifying events and no entrance requirements. Well, maybe one: the people at the feast know they are free now, free to show grateful hearts forgiving, merciful hearts, loving hearts to God and to one another. Free because we have seen, received and believe the message that God loves us just as we are.

Enter the woman at the dinner party at the home of Simon the Pharisee. In those days it was not unusual for uninvited guests to attend a dinner. Often, the invited guests, men, would recline at table. There they would not only have a meal – often accompanied by much wine, they would also carry on conversations and debates. Uninvited guests could stand around the walls of the room to overhear the conversation. It might not have been unusual for this woman to be in the room, but it would have been astounding and offensive, according to the conventions of this household, for her to approach and touch an invited guest.

Notice that Jesus is not astounded nor is he offended. He receives the anointing she offers, the anointing of her tears, the anointing of the ointment, the anointing of her kisses, of her love for him. We aren't told precisely what has occurred to set her free to lavish these gifts upon him. All we know is that she is free; she knows something about the forgiveness and mercy of God. Jesus affirms her behavior. And turning to look at her, he affirms the inner disposition behind the behavior. He affirms his love for her just as she is.

Her presence and her actions may be the greatest gift Simon has been offered to this point in her life. Right here is his opportunity to pause and wonder what has happened to her and in her that she should conduct herself this way. Let's confirm that she is a sinner and has much to be forgiven for. As a matter of fact, so are most of Jesus' followers, most of the people he encounters in his ministry, most of the Pharisees, most of the women and the men, most of the Gentiles and the Jews alike. Sinners. In Luke's understanding, all people are sinners. Every person needs forgiveness. Everyone stands in need of the mercy of God. You need. I need. Everyone in this sanctuary. . . And we are being offered forgiveness and mercy every second of every day.

God loves us just as we are. In Luke's view, when we know that we need mercy and forgiveness; when we realize they are offered to us; when we accept mercy and forgiveness, then we have found the freedom God intends for us. We can act with forgiveness and mercy out of gratitude. We can pour out our gratitude in forgiveness and mercy just as the woman pours out the ointment, the tears, the kisses.

I buy Luke's view. I am not good yet at living it out, and I need to rely on the God of forgiveness and mercy and re-creation to take my strange quirks, my craziness, my mean corners and transform me. I need the community of God's love to help me to keep cooperating with God in the project. And I need to show mercy to the Pharisee in me, to cooperate with God in freeing that separated one to be a part of the whole.

Can you identify a moment in your life when forgiveness and mercy were shown you, offered to you? That moment is now.

If you have received forgiveness and mercy from someone, you have received a gift from God, and you know that there is as much as you need there in God for you. If you have shown forgiveness and mercy, you have transmitted a gift from God. And if you await forgiveness and mercy, know that it is yours for the taking and you are loved just as you are. Amen