

Simon's Dilemma

Luke 7.36-50

June 13, 2010

The heart only reflects the Sky
when it is giving and compassionate.

- Meister Eckhart

The Reading

One 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 him 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.' ⁴⁰Jesus 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. ⁴²When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' ⁴³Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' ⁴⁴Then turning towards 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. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, 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.' ⁴⁸Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Short as it is, this story is rather complex, it has multiple characters within it, even has a story within a story; but for all its complexities, this story boils down to the relationship between two people; the unnamed woman from the streets of Jerusalem who comes in where Jesus is dining with Simon the Pharisee, who is hosting a dinner party for his friends. I don't know about you but I am glad that Simon is named in this story. Simon, the Pharisee, because when a story is abstract it doesn't really engage me; it certainly doesn't seem like something I

should be involved in myself. But here we have not just an ideal, not just a literary stick figure; here we have Simon the Pharisee, and that makes his story real. This tells me that Simon lived his life and lived his faith the same way that I live mine; one day at a time. Simon made decisions in the course of his everyday life as I do, as you do, that would have significance for his faith. He has a real decision, either to live his faith or to ignore his faith; just like you and I. Because of this we can say that Simon has actually more than one name in this story. Simon has another name; it's yours or it's mine, and because Luke leaves this story open-ended, we stand in Simon's place.

Simon is presented with a dilemma, but in this open-ended story we are not told what Simon decides, so in structuring the story this way, Luke invites us to be Simon, invites us to decide what we're going to do about the teachings of this Jesus and about this woman from the streets whose faith Jesus affirms to Simon's surprise. Before we can explore this dilemma, however, we need to know a little bit more about Simon and the unnamed woman.

We already know that Simon is a Pharisee, and that says a lot about him. He's highly educated. He's a man of respect in the community. He is very proud of both his ethical and moral integrity and of his religious practice... maybe a bit too proud. He's a man of means. He is what we might call a BMAS, not a Big Man at Church, but a Big Man at Synagogue. He's the go-to guy. He's the one you're going to call on to be a reader in the chancel. He's the one you're going to put on an ad-hoc committee to look at the finances of the church. He is a pillar of the synagogue, a pillar in the community, and he is very proud of just how careful he is, how scrupulous he is about honoring his religious duty and all of his responsibilities. There are stories about people like Simon who tithe down to the herbs they grow in their gardens.

We might also conclude that Simon is arrogant. Notice that when the woman comes in to wash Jesus' feet and to anoint them with oil, she is doing what a host in first century Palestine would have done for his or her guests. But Simon the Pharisee chooses not to wash Jesus' feet. It's almost as if he's saying he's already gone the extra mile by inviting this peasant preacher from Galilee to dinner. It's enough that I've invited him into my house; I certainly don't have to wash his feet! Simon seems to be pretty arrogant. He actually seems condescending toward Jesus, and certainly toward the unnamed woman.

Though she has no name, we know something about this woman as well by her actions. She is not a woman of means. She comes in from the streets to wash Jesus' feet. She's not a woman of respect. Simon calls her a sinner, which doesn't mean exactly what we think of when we say sinner. It simply means that she rarely darkened the door of the synagogue. She wasn't a regular church goer, and during the week when push came to shove she wasn't really concerned about the law. In consequence of all this, she was considered a sinner and was shunned by righteous people like Simon.

Nevertheless, she's the cause of Simon's dilemma, because she comes in from the street uninvited and washes Jesus' feet. No ceremony, no pomp, no circumstance; she simply comes in meekly and offers a humble expression of love. Under most circumstances, Simon would have had her kicked out of the house posthaste, but before he can do this, Jesus affirms this woman and her faith. He says in no uncertain terms that she is a woman of faith, and this is where Simon's dilemma comes in. If he is going to accept Jesus' affirmation of this woman, he's going to have to jettison just about everything that he thinks about faith. He's going to have to stop depending on his pride. He's going to have to stop thinking that he's just, loyal, and oh so faithful in his observance of the law. He's going to have to realize that he has nothing to gain by being a Big Man at Synagogue. He is going to have to accept that we are all in the same boat, and that we all approach God on the basis of grace. The basis of faith is well described in the song we sang earlier, "Only by grace do we enter, only by grace do we stand."

Simon has for too long trusted in his accomplishments, in his character, and in the man that he has become, and Jesus shatters his delusion in the simple gesture of affirming this woman. Here is faith, he says, a humble, unceremonious expression of love. Simon has a dilemma; if he's going to accept this woman as a woman of faith, he's going to have to jettison much that he is very proud of in his life, and come to God on the basis of grace. But his dilemma goes further, because not only must he affirm this woman but according to the model of faith Jesus has affirmed, he must reach out to her.

That's the gist of the story. Some might say the story is about the strength of her faith that saved her. But she wasn't saved by her faith. She wasn't saved by the love that she expressed toward Jesus. There is no tit for tat with God; there is no quid pro quo. God doesn't

save because we do anything. That's not what this passage is about. This passage expresses the truth that the grace God dispenses widely and freely is always coupled with love... always; the grace of God always generates spontaneous acts of gratitude, and expressions of love and compassion.

That's what Jesus recognizes in this woman; faith as the response to grace, love and compassion as the fruit of grace. She doesn't understand her faith as profoundly as Simon does. She doesn't have the respect of the community. She doesn't tithe or pay attention to the law. She might not have been totally sure about why she was even there, but her heart urged her to reach out in love. Jesus sees this gesture, and it speaks to him of faith. And he says so.

Simon has a dilemma. He can accept what Jesus calls faith and jettison much of what he has depended on for so many years; he can realize that faith expresses itself not in pride, not in smugness, not in arrogance, but in humble acts of love and compassion... invariably, always. Simon has a dilemma and so do we, because we are Simon. I warned you about this. We are Simon, and we make decisions every day about what kind of faith we will live and how we will express that faith. We can be proud of ourselves, of the persons we have become, or we can open our hearts to the grace of God and let that grace issue forth in unceremonious acts of love and service.

I invite us all to take a few moments this morning to reflect on the way we have lived our faith. There may be times when you have been keenly aware of God's grace in your life and have been inspired by that grace to an act of compassion, love, or an attitude of service toward others. There may have been times in your life, I dare say there have for all of us, when the presence of God's grace in your life has not inspired love because you have not allowed it to. I invite us to reflect on both situations; God's grace inspiring us to love, and our failure to extend the love that God's grace inspires in us. You will find in your bulletin a space reserved for you to write down those instances when God's grace has inspired you to acts of faith, and those instances when you have resisted God's grace. After you write them down, please detach your list, fold it over so that it will remain anonymous, and place it in the offering plate when it comes your way. Do this as a commitment to God; a commitment to find those places where you resist grace, and let them become inspirations to love. Do this as a commitment to accept

faith as Jesus describes it, a humble, faithful dependence on God that reaches out in compassion; a commitment to model the acts of this unnamed woman in your life. Only in this way will Simon's dilemma be resolved.