

“From the Goblet of Grace”

As I reread the Scripture for tonight’s meditation, I found myself thinking about the awkward position that Jesus was in. We have all been caught in the middle of two people who are at extreme, opposite ends of the pole. We have all likely suffered through a dinner with two people who were both outspoken yet on different sides of the political aisle. Imagine making small talk at a party with a prosecuting attorney and a public defender. Or sharing a meal at a community event with an evangelical Christian and an atheist. How would any of us react? Could we find common ground to keep the conversation going?

This is the picture that Luke paints for us in his version of the sinful woman who bathes Jesus’ feet with an expensive ointment and her precious tears. Think about it. We have Simon, the church leader on the one hand, and the woman – a street walker on the other. Simon, a Pharisee, who makes a living *promoting* the rules and the woman, who makes a living *breaking* them. I could almost hear my anxious, inner-voice asking, “How will Jesus handle THIS one?”

Such is the predicament that Jesus finds himself in when he comes to eat dinner at the home of Simon, an unknown Pharisee. But before we go any further, we could probably use a little insight. Jesus has been invited to this particular home although we do not know why. We are not given any preface to the story as to whether Simon is a devout follower of Jesus, a potential enemy, or simply a curious man. But we DO know

that in first century Palestine there were rules to be followed in the home of ANY good Jew.

Because it is likely that Simon was a man of wealth and power, he probably lived in a house that was built around an open courtyard. When any Rabbi came to visit, it would have been the custom to serve a meal to him in this courtyard. People ate in those days reclining on their left side and propping themselves up on their left elbow, freeing their right hand up to eat with. Rabbis would eat and discuss matters of religious importance during the meal. Therefore, people could come and go all evening, in and out of the courtyard, feasting not only on the meal provided by the host, but on the words of wisdom from the teacher of the Law.

Whenever a proper Jew had a guest in his home, three things were ALWAYS done before the meal. First, the host placed his hand on the guest's shoulder and gave him the kiss of peace. Second, because shoes in those days consisted of leather pieces simply strapped onto the foot to walk about the dusty streets, cool water was always poured over the feet of the guest on his arrival. And lastly, the head of the guest was anointed with a drop of sweet smelling incense or the perfume of crushed rose petals.

So our dinner begins at the home of Simon and, while Jesus is reclining and enjoying his meal, a woman who is described as a woman "of the city" comes in and begins to wash Jesus' feet with expensive ointment, bathe them with her tears and dry them with her hair. Of course, Simon is appalled! First, he is in disbelief that a woman would approach a Rabbi and touch him. But this is not just ANY woman. She is a SINFUL woman. And on top of that, she is, in a way, putting Simon down for not

fulfilling his obligations as host. Anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear knows that trouble is brewing.

Luke tells us that Simon begins thinking TO HIMSELF only, “How did SHE get into my house? Look at her groveling at the feet of Jesus. What a disgrace she is and what an embarrassment to ME! This Jesus must not be who he SAYS he is or he would know she is a sinner and banish her from our presence.” And Jesus, being God, HEARS Simons thoughts.

Now, we are educated people. Presbyterians who do everything in GOOD AND DECENT order. So we know what is going to happen. Jesus is going to ask himself who is the most pious, the most respected, the most learned. Then he is going to correct the entire situation. Refer to the Book of Order to get everyone in line.

But instead, Jesus asks a question. “Simon,” he begins quietly, “if there were two debtors, one who owed \$500 and one who owed \$50, and their creditor declared them BOTH free from debt, who would love him more?” Simon answers correctly, “The one who owed the greater debt.” And so we have an important Lenten question for everyone here. How much do you owe? How great is my debt? After all, that is what Lent is all about. RECOGNIZING how much we are indebted to the God who creates, redeems, sustains, forgives and loves everyone here.

If we are honest, we know that these are not the kind of questions that we really want to think about. Frankly, that is why so many people prefer Advent to Lent. Why we make such a big deal about Christmas Eve and would rather not think about Ash Wednesday. Advent means angels, lambs, stars and newborn babes. The pews are full and chairs are placed in the aisles for overflow on Christmas Eve. Lent means facing our

shortcomings and admitting what a mess we have made of our lives. Surely, we would rather gaze at the peacefulness of the nativity than the destruction of our own sins.

But Jesus' question to Simon will not allow us to remain in Bethlehem. He forces us to begin the journey to Jerusalem and to the Cross of Calvary. Because the awful, wonderful truth is that Jesus loves us too much to let us stay in Bethlehem. He loves us too much NOT to ask the question. So he does. WHO owes the greater debt?

And at that moment, we realize that WE are just like Simon. Simon is discourteous, disrespectful and disinterested. He doesn't offer Jesus the kiss of peace, soothe his hot, tired feet or bathe him with anything sweet smelling and refreshing. He thinks that he is so high up on the ladder of piety and that he has nothing to gain by kissing up to Jesus in any way. He is treating Jesus' presence lightly and taking him for granted.

The season of Lent is a time to examine our lives and discover how we have become discourteous, disrespectful and disinterested in the very God of love. It is a time to think about the lack of time we spend with God. About how we make light of His presence and how we take Him for granted. It is about facing up to our own spiritual arrogance.

And this text teaches us that Lent is really about understanding how much we are called to be like the woman. You see, the reason Jesus asked the question of Simon was not only to point out his arrogance but to point out the great need of the woman. Jesus knew that the woman was thirsty. Thirsty from guilt. Thirsty from regret. Thirsty from what Max Lucado calls "countless nights of making love and finding none." So Jesus extended to her the goblet of grace. And she drank.

When we remain in the starlight of Bethlehem it is because we do not recognize how thirsty we are. After all, it wasn't that Simon couldn't *be forgiven*, it's just that he never *asks* to be. He did not recognize his thirst. But when we come to the season of Lent and admit our brokenness and recognize our need to repent then God places us on the path to Jerusalem, which after all, leads to the empty tomb of resurrection.

Friends, Ash Wednesday is the time to realize that God wants us to be just like the sinful woman. God wants us to pray for our spiritual arrogance to be turned into weeping of joy. To pray that God will take my disinterest and turn it into passion. To pray that God will take your disrespect and turn it into reverence. And to remember that we are loved by a God who would pour the blood of his only child over every head here in order to bring us into harmony with his righteousness. In order to show his love. In order to give every person here life – abundant life, joyful life, cleansing life, ETERNAL life.

So this time of preparation is about realizing how great our debts are. And the Easter season reminds us more than ever that Jesus Christ has paid the debt for every person here. By his death and resurrection, Jesus is holding out the goblet of grace to each of us. His hand is stretched to you and to me – offering the cleansing love of forgiveness. Lent is simply about accepting it. Then we, like the woman, will know that the more we are forgiven, the more we are loved. Come, take the goblet of grace and drink deeply. Amen.