

June 13, 2010

Matthew 21: 28-32, Luke 7:36- 8:3

Living in Love

I first met Marguerite around 1970. She was born in China as the daughter of missionaries, but her family settled back in the US when she was very young and from then on she was raised in Georgia. As a young woman she lived in Mississippi and was married to a handsome young minister named David. They later moved to southern California, and I met them a few years later.

Marguerite knew a lot about southern hospitality! She was a consummate hostess for the many church events and she loved having people in her home! People often stayed with Marguerite and David, and Marguerite never even thought to complain about the extra work of having guests. To her, it was all joy!

No one was a stranger to Marguerite. Everyone who walked into her house was greeted cheerfully and enthusiastically, backed up by a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Before you knew it, you were seated in the most comfortable chair, being offered something to drink and something to eat, and telling Marguerite all about everything going on in your life at her request.

Marguerite made everyone feel at home. She made us feel important and cared for and loved.

She had the gift of hospitality, and that gift had been polished to an expertise that I have never seen in anyone else. Hospitality was part of her southern culture's values, and she embodied that value.

Hospitality is also an important value in the Middle East, both now and in the time of Jesus. When someone came into your house in those days, the custom was to greet them with a kiss on the cheek, give them some water to wash the dust of the road off their feet, and to put a drop of scented oil on their heads to take away the sweaty smell from travelling.

This was a common reception for all guests, but especially for a well-known rabbi such as Jesus. And yet, when Jesus came into the home of Simon the Pharisee, Simon did not do any of those three things. Simon had invited Jesus to dinner but he did not treat him as an honored or even a welcomed guest. Simon was not showing hospitality at all. He could have learned a lot from Marguerite.

It's not clear why, if he invited Jesus to come, he did not behave appropriately.

He was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were questioning why Jesus would associate with rabble, the sinners and other undesirable people. Pharisees were a sect of Jews who kept themselves apart from the common people. They strictly followed the laws of Moses and the traditions of the elders.

The traditions of the elders were unwritten traditional interpretations of the law---guidelines and requirements that were very specific about many daily living activities that went above and beyond what is written in the Old Testament.

Above all, Pharisees wanted to keep themselves pure and holy, and for them this meant not associating with people who were not pure and holy, people who were considered unclean.

Jesus had no such concern. He didn't worry about being contaminated by anyone else. He touched lepers and dead people and those who were possessed by demons. He ate with anyone and did not exclude any type of person from his relationships.

So maybe Simon considered Jesus to be impure, unclean, defiled. He was interested enough in what Jesus taught to invite him to his house for dinner, but not comfortable about actually touching him, kissing him, washing his feet.

Maybe this is the explanation for the lack of hospitality that Simon showed Jesus. Or maybe there is another reason. Scripture doesn't tell us exactly.

Jesus came into the house and he himself points out that Simon gave him no kiss, no water for his feet, no oil for his head. But dinner was served and they began eating.

In those days, people ate at low tables while reclining on pillows. They leaned on their left arms, with their right hands free to pick up the food. Their feet were tucked up behind them.

This is how the woman could reach his feet. She wasn't crawling around under the table; she was approaching Jesus from her position near the wall. She had come in with other people who wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. It wasn't unusual for uninvited guests to come in when someone had a prominent visitor.

So it took some time for Simon to catch what was going on because before he said anything, the woman had already cried enough to wet Jesus' feet and wipe them with her hair. She was already kissing his feet and putting the oil on them before Simon said anything to Jesus. Maybe it was the smell of the oil that finally got his attention.

And he wasn't happy about it. Jesus was allowing this sinner, this unclean person to touch him, to kiss him, to let her hair down. It was considered a great scandal for a woman to let her hair down in front of a man who was not her husband!

When Simon criticizes him for allowing this woman's actions, Jesus answers him right back----You gave me no kiss, no water for my feet, no oil for my head! You completely failed to show me any hospitality at all, not even the slightest amount of respect!

But she did! And why? Because she loves. A lot. And why does she love? Because she has been forgiven.

Actually, which came first, the forgiveness or the love is not really clear. Many scholars have analyzed the grammar and the syntax to try to figure out if she was forgiven because she loved or if she loved because she was forgiven.

Translated literally, Jesus tells her “Your sins have been forgiven” but at what point? Maybe the day before? Maybe as she was wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair? It’s not clear.

The story, the parable, Jesus tells clears it up, maybe. There are two men who owe money. One owes \$10 and the other owes \$100. The person they owe the money to cancels both debts. Simon guesses and Jesus confirms that the one who had owed \$100 will love the former loan holder more than the one who only owed \$10.

He tells Simon that the one who has been forgiven much, loves much. This sounds like the forgiveness comes first.

God's grace and forgiveness is always available to us. God loves us first and out of that love, we can be forgiven.

But it's not cheap grace. Not grace that we get for nothing.

Because the flip side of what Jesus is saying is that Simon doesn't love him because Simon has not been forgiven.

Simon has not been forgiven for one reason-----he has not admitted his need of forgiveness. He sees himself as a good man, righteous and holy. He has kept all the laws and the traditions of the elders. He is not a sinner! What debt does he owe that needs to be forgiven??

And you know the answer. The sin of self-righteousness, of pride, of arrogance. The sin of excluding others from his relationships, his hospitality.

The sin of judging others.

He has judged the woman as not being good enough to touch Jesus. He has judged Jesus as not being a true prophet because Jesus allows this sinful woman to touch him.

But Jesus knows better. The woman has admitted her sins and been forgiven. She has repented and wants to live a better life.

When Jesus forgave her for her sins, she became holy and pure, clean instead of unclean.

And her actions were motivated by love, not pride and not smug self-righteousness.

What she did she did because she loved Jesus! She loved him so much that she was not thinking about herself any more.

She was not self-conscious enough to think about keeping her hair up and her emotions under control. She was not thinking about how anyone seeing her actions was going to think of her. She was only thinking about how much she loved Jesus. She needed to show him her love and gratitude and so that's what she did.

Her tears were enough to wash his feet. Why was she crying so much?

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The woman in today's passage was crying with relief and gratitude and joy and love. She was grateful to be with Jesus. She loved him more than she could show any other way than to wash and kiss his feet and anoint them with oil.

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News! And so she loved those feet! The feet of Jesus, who had forgiven her sins, who knew who she was and what she had done, and still loved her. She knew who he was, a prophet sent from God, but more than a prophet, he had the power to forgive sins! More than a priest, too. Jesus was the king of her heart, the Lord of her life.

And so she cried. And she forgot her socially-acceptable place and did what her heart told her to do----did what she could to show her love to Jesus.

Simon did not really know who Jesus was. He questioned whether or not Jesus was really a prophet sent by God. He was curious, that's all, but he was not convinced that Jesus was anything more than another country rabbi. And he was so sure of his own holiness that he didn't think he needed to be forgiven. And so he was not forgiven.

Simon was not living in love. He was living letter by letter in obedience to the law. He didn't understand that the point of the law is to help us know how to live in the presence of God, loving God and neighbor. All he knew was that he was "Supposed to" do certain things, and he did them.

For him, holiness was something you achieved, not something that happened as a result of loving God. And he had worked very hard to be holy.

And he missed the whole point. Living in love is what Jesus was doing. The greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Simon had gotten so caught up in all the details and all the traditions that he forgot to be loving!

And sometimes we do the same thing. We forget that other people are all beloved children of God. We forget that Jesus came to save us all, forgive us all, love us all. And our actions are motivated by something other than love and we become very selfish and turn in on ourselves, thinking we are better than other people because “they” do all these bad things and “Thank God I’m not like that!”

Jesus came into Simon’s house that night because he loved Simon. Simon didn’t open his heart to receive that love, so he couldn’t admit his need to be forgiven.

He couldn't show Jesus love because that might have been admitting his own guilt. And he was determined not to be revealed as a sinner. That was something that scared him.

When we open our doors but not our hearts to God, we are only partway there. We need to go beyond appearances and actions to let Jesus way down into our deepest secrets, letting him see the tears that we hide, showing our love in unselfish, unself-conscious ways. Ways that others might think of as unacceptable.

We need to throw ourselves at the feet of Christ and give ourselves completely to living in love.

My dear friend Marguerite knew that was the only way to live. She never cared that some people thought she went overboard with showing her love. She opened her door to anyone who came, and there are probably hundreds of people who thought of her as their second mom. I can think of people who are well-known who were often in her house, people like Maxie Dunnam, a minister who has written numerous books.

I can think of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia who stayed with Marguerite when they first came to this country. I can think of students and displaced women and young pastors and people from all over the world who somehow ended up in Marguerite's house.

She never turned anyone away. She never asked about their history, their background, their past sins. She opened her door, greeted them with a hug and a kiss, a cup of hot coffee or a glass of cold lemonade. And they knew they were loved.

Every single one of them. And so they listened when she talked about God, about Jesus. Those who already knew Christ learned more. Those who didn't know Christ came to know him in a very real way.

And this is living in love, that we love one another the way that Christ loved us----meeting us where we are and bringing us closer to God.

Amen.