

First Impressions 11th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-

2 Samuel 12: 7-10, 13 Psalm 32 Galatians 2: 16, 19-21 Luke 7: 36-8:3

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The woman who anoints Jesus in today's gospel comes with a lot of baggage, not her own, but ours. A lot has been said about her. Some have called her Mary Magdalene—she wasn't, but that hasn't stopped people from calling her by the name of the apostle to the apostles and identifying Mary as a the "sinful woman" of today's story. Nor does today's passage warrant calling the woman a prostitute; there's no evidence in the story that she was. We are simply told that she was a sinner who was present at the Pharisee's house, stood behind Jesus weeping and when the time was right, bathed his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them and anointed them with the ointment.

We are in a section of Luke's gospel concerned with Jesus' identity and people's response to him. Who is he? Is he a prophet (7:26)? Do people "see" who Jesus really is? In the passage just before today's, Jesus voices what some people think about him, "He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners! God's wisdom is vindicated by all who accept it (7: 34-35). The woman shows she does accept Jesus as God's wisdom; Simon, by his lack of response, shows he doesn't.

Another common misinterpretation of today's gospel is that the woman "earned" her forgiveness by her outpouring of love for Jesus. On first reading there is a temptation to reduce this gospel passage to a moralizing tale which goes something like this: if you show a lot of love and do something for Jesus, you will earn forgiveness. That's not what the tale says. The parable Jesus tells Simon makes this clear; a person who had been forgiven a great debt will, as a consequence, show great love to the one who has forgiven the debt. Which is what the woman has done (Cf. "Quotable" below). She has already been forgiven, and her acts are an expression that she realized what she had received and is grateful. There is a past to this story—an experience and recognition of forgiveness.

John Pilch (THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS: SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, CYCLES A, B.C. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995.) suggests our ancestors frequently judged people by external features and actions (1Sam. 16:7). So, a person seeing the woman's extravagant display of love and gratitude to Jesus would conclude that her actions indicated she had already experienced the forgiveness of her sins. As Jesus affirms, "So, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven because [since] she has shown great love."

Simon, the Pharisee, extends the invitation to Jesus for dinner. That seems like a gesture of hospitality and respect. But he fails to follow-up on the hospitality with the usual middle eastern gestures of welcome and friendship. Perhaps, like Herod, he was curious about Jesus and wondered who this man, the people called a prophet of God, might be. The account shows that Simon doubted that Jesus was from God. But the woman doesn't, for her actions reveal that she knows she has been forgiven and is demonstrating in observable gestures that she believes Jesus is God's instrument of forgiveness. Apparently Simon doesn't see himself as a sinner, nor does he acknowledge that, were he a sinner and had faith in Jesus, he too would be forgiven. There were two sinners before Jesus that day: the woman who had experienced forgiveness and was expressing it and Simon, who wouldn't admit his need for forgiveness, nor recognize Jesus as the way to be forgiven.

Hospitality is a strong theme in Luke's gospel, and it is an important virtue in the middle East. In Luke, Jesus is God's hospitality to sinners. Those who are on the outside, or the underclass of society because of poverty, sickness or sin are welcomed to the table by Jesus, God's host at the banquet. Luke frequently portrays Jesus at table. Sometimes he is the host, as he was when he fed the 5,000. (Later in the gospel he will be the host who gives himself as food, e.g., 24: 14-20). Other times he is the guest, as in today's passage. It is not uncommon, as in today's story, that while Jesus is at table, he presents a teaching or challenge to those around him—especially the host. He is trying to open the eyes of those at table with him to help them see the world through other eyes—his eyes. He is doing that for us today through this gospel proclaimed to us who have gathered together at this eucharistic table.

I was sent a link by a reader to a webpage that has a brief video clip my Michael Frost, founding director of the Centre for Evangelism and Global Mission at Morling Theological College in Sydney. I found his comments helpful as an approach to today's gospel passage. Frost's reflections, while not on today's gospel, may help explain how the "sinful woman" ever got into a religious Pharisees' house at dinner time. There was a custom prevalent in the Palestinian and Roman world of Jesus' time. As invited guests were arriving to a wealthy or prominent person's house, if someone who was poor, starving, a leper, prostitute, homeless, or anyone in need, could slip in with the guests, the host was obliged to feed them--- though not at the main table. Frost calls these people "shadow people." Perhaps the woman got into the Pharisee's house because she was a "shadow person," —she shadowed the invited guests through the door. Frost goes further noting how many times Jesus is at various people's homes, sometimes invited, as in today's account; but sometimes there is no indication whether or not he was invited. Perhaps in some of those gospel stories where Jesus is at a dinner he showed up uninvited, a "shadow person." When Simon doesn't honor Jesus with the usual ablutions and

anointings he is treating him as one would treat a “shadow person,” an outcast.

Frost goes on to note how often Jesus calls his followers to attend to the hungry, poor and outcast. He does this because of his love and compassion. But another reason is that he is the “shadow person,” the uninvited poor person who shows up unexpectedly at our tables, in our churches and in society. Jesus shows sensitivity to the woman who anoints him, not only out of concern for the poor, but also because he knows what it is like to be the outsider. Frost emphasizes that Jesus’ call to service is a call to see Christ in the outsider for he is present in the “shadow person.”

Today’s gospel shows us that the issue isn’t about proving our love for God by doing heroic deeds and gaining forgiveness. But it is about what Paul says in our Galatians reading. A person “is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ....” Our faith leads us to believe, like the woman, that we are forgiven sinners. What shall we do about it? We can’t wash Jesus feet and anoint him to show our gratitude. He’s not around for us the way he was for the woman: but he is still with us.

In many ways the gospel tells us that Jesus is with us in the “shadow people.” They are the ones who can slip by us and come unbidden into our awareness: they are the difficult family member who keeps calling to talk; the people in the back pews in hair curlers and frayed jackets; the maimed from the war now living in veteran’s homes; the protestors for health care and food stamps; the refugees from Darfur whose faces keep showing up on the evening news, etc. These are the people we must bring out of the shadows, recognize and respond to their presence as the gospels show Jesus did.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Reid, Barbara E. *PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE, YEAR C*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000.

Based on the Lectionary sequence, Reid analyzes the parables for each liturgical year and ends each discussion with a reflection on the preaching possibilities of each parable.

QUOTABLE

The perfect passive verb *apheontai*, “have been forgiven,” in vv. 47,48, connotes a past action whose effects endure into the present. This, coupled with the verb *en*, “was,” in v. 37, which is the imperfect tense, connoting “used to be,” indicates that she had been forgiven her sins before coming to the home of Simon.

----Reid, page 95.

JUSTICE NOTES

“Praying Communities: “*Loving Much*”

“Our social ministry must be anchored in prayer, where we uncover the depths of God’s call to seek justice and pursue peace. In prayer, we find the reasons, the strength, and the call to follow Jesus in the ways of charity, justice, and peace.” (US Catholic Bishops: Communities of Salt and Light)”

One of the possible gifts of summer is more time in our day for quiet and prayer. As the pace of life slows a bit perhaps we can find the space to open ourselves to God’s Spirit and to let ourselves “undergo God like a tree undergoes summer.”

“Prayer changes reality because we allow God to change us. By intentionally praying together we choose to become an “us.”- the body of Christ, inspired, emboldened and animated to love and live for God’s people. ***‘Prayer makes us hunger for justice and the need for justice makes us hunger for prayer. We are hungry all the time’*** (JustFaith Voices: Spring 2007)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Jamey Cheek #0538027 (On death row since 7/3/97)
- Leroy Mann #0255136 (7/15/97)
- Phillip Mann #0585797 (8/22/97)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606