

Sermon for June 12, 2016

## **Her Tears and The Grace of God**

**June 12, 2016**

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**(Galatians 2:15-21 and Luke 7:36-8:3)**

As I begin this sermon I must give credit to Dr. Kenneth Bailey who's understanding of Jesus in the context of the middle east world has been a true gift to me and to the all who know his work. Those who've come to the 10:10 class in the Commons Room this spring were introduced to him via his Dvd lectures. I'm sad to report that he died a few weeks ago, but he's left us his work, and that will live.

I'm also going to need your help with this sermon. I will be asking you what Paul meant when he said "I do not nullify the grace of God." So who is lawyer here and will you tell us in a sentence or two, not now, but at the end what it means to nullify some law? Who going to explain that? And who's going to remind me to ask the question?

This is a teaching sermon intended to illustrate the story of Jesus in the home of Simon the Pharisee. You just heard how Jesus was treated when he came into the house; namely he was treated very rudely by his host.

And here's my question: have you ever accepted the invitation to come to dinner, and upon arriving been immediately treated rudely? I have. A brief story. Many years ago when I was the rector of St. Luke's in Minneapolis we had a new and young director of the altar Guild, She invited me to her home for dinner, where I would share the meal with her two lovely girls, and her husband—He had never came to church. The rain was pouring out of the sky on that spring evening. I was wearing a raincoat and a hat both of which got thoroughly soaked. I rang the doorbell. Her husband came to the door, opened the inside door. Saw me dripping with rain. Said, "Come on in." But he didn't open the screen door. I opened the screen door, shaking off the water, while standing in the vestibule. There was no hand shake to greet me. By this time he had retreated to the other end of the living room and was hunched over in front of the television watching the news. I wasn't exactly sure what to do with my hat or raincoat. I hung it on the doorknob. I sat down on the couch but there were no other words of greeting—at least until his wife came out of the kitchen and was happy to see me. She welcomed me. Most of the evening he maintain his silence. The rudeness continued throughout dinner.

What happened to Jesus was worse because it took place in front of *all* of the community in what is an unnamed village in Luke's account. So let's get a picture of what that dinner was like in his world.

Recognize that Jesus had been teaching and healing in the nearby villages and throughout Judea. So whenever he would arrive in such a village many common people would be wondering who among the most important would invite him to dinner? It was never what time would he eat, but what house would have him for dinner? This time it was a Pharisee. Why? Probably because Jesus was an honored person, another respected rabbi, who they wanted to meet. Wrong! They wanted to interrogate him if he indeed was a prophet.

But why was that woman there at that house and the meal? Why were all the others present if they weren't invited? It's because a meal in such an important house wasn't totally a private affair. People from the village could stand around those dining, the special guests who were reclining in a circle. You could stand by their feet and listen to what they were discussing. "Be quiet," you might say to the one next to you. I want to hear what these important men are saying?"

As Luke tells the story this woman of the streets stood with others behind the guests. She was behind Jesus and Luke tells us she used her tears to wash his feet, kissed his feet, and anointed them with perfume. Those raised in a Middle Eastern world would be horrified that this gesture came from this woman of the streets. She should never have let down her in public—only in front of her husband. It is also the duty of the host to call for the washing the feet, the anointing the hands and to greet his guests with a kiss. Every society and culture has norms for hospitality. Question: why would this woman be the one to offer these gestures of hospitality, and do so with such obvious grief? I need someone to remember to ask me this question: "Why did this woman cry her tears over the feet of Jesus?" Who will be ready with that question?

Next to speak is the Pharisee hosting the dinner. "If says, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is who is touching him—she is a sinner.'" Ah. They were there to grill Jesus who they knew already associated with sinners.

Then Jesus told them a parable. Not a long complicated story parable like the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan. It seems to be such a simplistic story. A creditor has two people who owe him money. One owes 500 denarii and the other 50. He forgives both debts. Which one will love him more? Jesus asked. Obviously it's easy. The one who owed the more money.

But it's a trap. And it also gets at the two sides to the understanding of forgiveness that is contained in the Aramaic word that Jesus would have used in this parable about forgiveness. The story wasn't just about forgiving a debt; it was also about forgiving sins. Sin, you see, does involve evil deeds a pious person shouldn't do, but debts are responsibilities that aren't fulfilled. We need to ask forgiveness for both.

Who is the debtor who was forgiven much and loved much? Obviously this woman. And the one who owed little and loved little. This religious leader.

It's about to get much worse. Now remember my story of standing outside in the rain and the lack of a proper greeting. Do you think I said something to man who treated me so rudely. Did I say "You never opened the door for me, or took my coat and hat so it would properly dry?" No I never said a word, and never mentioned it to my friend, the new head of the altar guild.

But Jesus? He recounted the whole story, telling the Pharisee what he didn't do, and telling again what this woman did to make up for that lack of hospitality. And Jesus told the Pharisee and all gathered there why it was that this woman acted as the host for Jesus.

Jesus said,

"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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." (Luke 7:44-47)

So now all the eyes were on this woman. And we have a question to ask: "Why did this woman cry her tears over the feet of Jesus?"

The key phrase, in what Jesus said about her is "I tell you, her sins, which were many, *have been forgiven.*" She is not forgiven because of what she has done in that house. The verb is framed as an action in the past that is completed. She has been forgiven. And she knew it. She was inside the love of God and nothing in her past could affect her being part of the new life she had in Jesus. She could respond with a costly demonstration of love. And Jesus offered her, in the midst of that household ready to interrogate him, another costly demonstration of love. This woman, Jesus declared, had a saving faith and could go in peace. Go where? Where ever she might find Jesus and others who knew God's grace.

Which gets us to Paul. Now my lawyer friend. What does nullification mean?

[Note in constitutional law in the US it is a legal theory that a state has the right to nullify, or invalidate, any federal law which that state has deemed unconstitutional. It is a theory that has always been rejected by the highest courts in our country.]

And Paul said "I do not nullify the grace of God."

Paul must have had in mind that there were those who nullified the grace of God. Who were they?

Here's what I believe. They were the ones, no matter who they were, that could see someone different than themselves, who wasn't as blessed, or as special, or as important as they saw themselves who would dare to say, "There but for the grace of God, go I." (I know I've said that. Maybe we all have.)

Wait a minute. Is the grace of God something parceled out to those with apparent blessings, or who are special, or important or whatever? If you think that for a moment then you nullify the grace of God. Which is exactly what the Pharisee did in today's Gospel story.

And that woman with her tears is wiping the feet of Jesus with her hair, because she has found at some point in coming to know Jesus, that she has been loved. And no matter what she had done, and especially all the debts she owed—she was forgiven and given life. It was God's grace that pulled her into the community of those committed to Jesus. "I have been crucified with Christ," is what Paul declared. I think it means that a narrow judgmental arrogance regarding God's grace was also crucified. I can imagine Paul hearing that woman's story, and I see the two of them breaking bread together.