

Sermon Notes for 6/12/16 (Pentecost 4)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 7:36 – 8:3

Theme: THE SHAPE OF FAITH-FILLED DISCIPLESHIP

The Point: Even when faced with situations of cultural dissonance, the disciple serves best by service done for the sake of the Savior.

Introduction: Just as with the parable that Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee, so this whole account depicts a portrait of contrast between what is and what is not the way of discipleship. We have a dinner party thrown by Simon the Pharisee, to which Jesus is invited. We also have a picture of a notorious woman, one who was known throughout the city to be “a sinner,” whatever that may have involved for her. And in the contrast between Simon and this sinful woman we have Luke’s compelling portrait of discipleship. So what does he say about **THE SHAPE OF FAITH-FILLED DISCIPLESHIP?**

First of all, we see that faith-filled discipleship does not wait for a comfortable cultural setting before displaying itself. Simon the Pharisee was on his home turf. In fact, the party that he was throwing was at his own house. He knew every nook and cranny, and he was doubtless proud of it. No wonder he wanted to show it off to the folks that he invited to the dinner party, which included (no doubt as a gesture of generosity) the rabbi Jesus. He controlled the guest list – and probably felt that he was extending himself by sending an invitation to the Nazareth rabbi, Jesus. This was Simon’s terrain, pure and simple.

One person who was quite unfamiliar with the terrain was the woman from the city. She was known by the city for her questionable character. They all knew her as “a sinner.” You can probably imagine some of the possibilities that may have described her life. And yet, hearing Jesus was in the area, she sought Him out, even in a place where she was not welcome. Perhaps she would have been at home in the local pub or the local street corners. But Jesus was at the Pharisee’s house, and there she met and served Jesus. As she paid attention to Jesus, Simon complained 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.” So Simon had a box for the woman (the “open sinner” box), and now he had a box for Jesus, too (the “not a prophet” box). He figured that Jesus’ toleration of this woman’s attention tagged Him also, and not in a favorable light.

Jesus would not allow this Pharisee’s obvious labeling to go unnoticed. With Simon’s permission, He launched into a little parable. “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” But it seems that Simon did not get the point, at least not right away. However, Jesus made sure the point was clear by pointing out the different treatment He had received from Simon versus what He had received from the sinful woman.

Simon had provided no water for Jesus’ feet, though that was common courtesy in Israel at that time. It might be something like having a guest come in the middle of winter in our territory and not offering the guest any place to hang the inevitable winter coat. Thoughtless and inhospitable, at best!

But the faith-filled disciple finds creative ways to implement common courtesies, even when they are not expected. There have been times when we were invited to the home of a family in our church or our neighborhood – and when we arrived, the hosts showed our children to a special area of the house that was decked out with just what they (and the host children, if there were any) could use to enjoy themselves while the grownups “talked shop” and visited. Creative hospitality that went over and above – that was what this woman showed to Jesus as she bathed His feet with her tears and wiped them with what she had

available, her hair.

Simon had not given Jesus the common embrace that was customary in welcoming guests. That embrace was a display of cordial affection. This oversight was not exactly a slap in the face, but it was certainly one way of showing a person that they were less than fully a welcome part of this gathering. This would have been like inviting someone to your home and then not telling them “Hello” when they come in – or refusing to allow them into the conversations that are already going on.

But the woman had made up for Simon’s lack by over and over again kissing Jesus’ feet. In her faith-filled discipleship, she went out of her way to show Him honor, though the guest of the banquet had shown Him no such respect. It seemed, from Simon’s viewpoint, that, while he had invited Jesus to the meal, he might have done so for any number of reasons, but certainly not because he wanted to learn from Jesus or to interact with Him in any significant way. Of course, Jesus would not let the opportunity pass Him by to engage Simon fully in conversation and in consideration of just what was going on.

Simon had not thought to have Jesus’ head anointed with oil. This was done for a guest, in order to provide further comfort and blessing. If you didn’t think the guest was worthy of such honor, you might skip this step of hospitality.

However, the woman had once again covered Simon’s thoughtlessness by anointing Jesus’ feet with the ointment that she had brought. Here was an extravagant gift, both in expense and in the openness with which she applied it to Jesus. It would have brought a fragrance to the whole house. But this woman did not do it to call attention to herself; she did it in order to honor Jesus.

The upshot is that the woman is commended because she shows great love. And the reason for that is spelled out clearly by Jesus. He clarifies the point of His earlier parable: “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” She was not forgiven because she showed such love. It was just the opposite. Her love flowed from her knowledge that she was forgiven. This woman was well aware of her sins, but in repentance she also tasted the extravagant love and forgiveness of Jesus. That is why she could afford to be so extravagant in her display of love. Simon, by contrast, was stingy with his favors toward Jesus, since he had assumed that Jesus had done him no big favors, and that was the measure of his response. The sinful woman learned what Paul said when he wrote, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Kretzmann says in his commentary of this woman: “She had been deceived by the apparent pleasures of sin, she had received gall and wormwood instead of the expected honey, and now she was, in desperation, looking down into the abyss of a life of shame. But the news of Jesus, the Savior of sinners, whose kindness to the lowly and outcast was heralded far and wide, had brought her to the realization of her position; she now felt the full weight of her corruption and misery. . . . Jesus knew the thoughts of the Pharisee, and He soon gave him evidence that He was a prophet who knew the hearts of men. He determined to give this haughty Pharisee a much-needed lesson, but in a kind and gentle way, with the object of convincing and gaining him.”

Despite Simon’s lack of respect and hospitality toward Jesus, Jesus still loved him. Simon did not realize his own deep sinfulness and his need, and so he had no particular reason (in his own mind, at least) to show love and kindness – or even basic friendliness – to Jesus. So what is your own personal response to Jesus? Have you realized the depth of your own need – or do you see yourself (as Simon doubtless saw himself) as basically a pretty good person? Do you realize just how far away from God your sins will keep you – or do you think you can exist with just a perfunctory acquaintance with God? Do you not get the

point (as Simon did not) that genuine repentance is the only road open to the Father's heart?

Consider also the final verses of today's Gospel reading. As Jesus traveled around the area of Galilee, the apostles accompanied Him, as we would expect. But Luke notes another part of the company of followers: "some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources." Most rabbis would not welcome women as students. One commentator writes: "Rabbis did not have female disciples. Girls were not allowed to receive a formal education. Indeed one Jewish teacher, R. Eleizer is quoted as saying, 'They shall burn the teachings of Torah rather than convey them to women.'"

Here is another cultural value that Jesus turns on its head. Women were welcome in the close circle of followers. He did not call any woman as apostles, but He certainly honored them in many other ways. He knew that they were just as capable of learning as were men. And He receives from them the support that kept Him and the twelve going while they were on the road preaching and teaching.

Godet (quoted in Arndt's Luke commentary): "What a Messiah for the eye of the flesh, as a being living on the charity of men! But what a Messiah for the spiritual eye, the Son of God living on the love of those to whom His own love is giving life! What an interchange of good offices between heaven and earth goes on around His presence!" We hear in this an echo of Paul's reminder, "Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher" (Gal. 6:6).

And the women keep teaching us. I recently heard part of a speech by Corrie ten Boom, that courageous woman who, with her family in Holland, hid many Jews from German arrest and destruction during the early days of the Second World War. They were finally sent to a prison camp, where Corrie's father and sister died. Years later a man came to Corrie and introduced himself to her – he was one of those who had tortured and killed her sister. He had come to know God's forgiveness in Christ and asked her to forgive him as well. She said, "I cannot." But then she says that she saw the cross and Jesus hanging naked on the cross, dying for her. And she realized that, though she could not forgive this man, Jesus could. And she shook that prison guard's hand in peace and acceptance. She has also said, "They have no need for the healing ministry of Christ and the Church, who cannot and do not admit they are broken. They will not arrive at their full healing in Christ who cannot and do not forgive – themselves, and others." That is what Simon needed. That is what each of us needs as well.

Luther (quoted in Kretzmann): "That, then, is the office of Christ the Lord which He carries on in the world, namely, that He rebukes sin and forgives sin. He rebukes the sin of those that do not acknowledge their sin, and especially of those that do not want to be sinners and consider themselves holy, as this Pharisee did. He forgives sin to those that feel it and desire forgiveness; as this woman was a sinner." Christ's forgiveness is the basic essential, the quintessence, the critical lifeblood of the life of discipleship.

Conclusion: Even when faced with situations of cultural dissonance, the disciple serves best by service done for the sake of the Savior. Robert Kolb: "Our core identity, the one that will last because it lies in God's regard for us through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for us, can give people a whole new vision of life from which to build hope again. In an age in which many mean it when they say, 'I wish I were dead,' we are able to say, 'I have just the thing for you,' and fit them with the death of the old identity and the garment of resurrection in Christ. This can foster a sense of peace and joy that people have never been able to dream of before." Yes, indeed, our baptismal death in union with Jesus gives us a deep and abiding sense of peace and joy and real life. As we are led to mourn the depth of our own sin, so we are called to trust the persistent and ever-steady forgiveness of our Savior. And from that assurance, we are enabled to serve Him even when it seems difficult and expensive to do so. May our lives ring with

this love for the Jesus whose love means everything to us. AMEN!