

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, 17 June 2007
St. Paul's Parish. Kent
The Reverend Allen LaMontagne

A sermon preached on the Gospel according to Luke 7:36-8.3

"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

"Sinner" is a term we usually hear characterized negatively. Whether it's used to describe ourselves or someone else, it almost always sounds derogatory. *Jesus changes that, and we must change with him.* Jesus changes the relationship between us and the only One who has the right to say anything about our sins or those of any person--God. Jesus makes sinners right with God. Jesus alone does this. There is no other way to be reconciled with God than by virtue of what Jesus does on our behalf--dies for us, takes our sins away, forgives us--makes us "worthy to stand before God" (Eucharistic Prayer B, BCP 368).

The story in the Gospel today is a remarkable illustration of a sinner being made worthy to stand before God. It is not spelled out explicitly, but the general consensus appears to be that the woman in the Gospel is a prostitute. It's also not clear what prompts her to throw caution to the wind and lavishly tend to Jesus, his feet, but her action reflects a most uncommon Love she has found in him.

I imagine what touches her is the way he gives dignity to people unaccustomed to it. She knows better than Rodney Dangerfield what it means to "get no respect." Maybe she sees him touch and heal a sick person, a leper perhaps. Maybe she hears of this Rabbi who stands boldly between a crowd bent on stoning to death a woman caught in an adulterous affair, asking them, "whoever is without sin, cast the first stone..." We have to believe somewhere along the line Jesus touches her heart, an experience with a man so utterly different than she is accustomed to having...

Whatever moves her to seek him out, she is undeterred by the setting in which she finds him. It matters not that every Pharisee's eye in the room is filled with rageful condemnation of both her and the one whose feet she bathes with tears and perfume.

It doesn't matter, it won't *ever* matter what Jesus or the woman do from this point on. The Pharisees conclude that they are sinners. He is a winebibber, too often seen fraternizing on the wrong side of the tracks. She could join a monastery, but they will still remember her, and remind her of herself, the self they think themselves better than; just as they will mock Jesus on the cross as he dies for their sins. In the game of self-made righteousness, they win--they make the rules she and others play by and they don't have to.

One quick aside...it's tempting to think this is simply about Jews and Christians, as though Christians get this all right, and Jews don't; as if Pharisees are only Jews. If only it were that easy: it isn't. The kind of judgment exacted on the woman and Jesus is not

limited to one group or another. In fact, no one is exempt from the temptation to judge others unkindly, behind one's back. Like the proverbial ex-smoker, often it is the one who gets "right with God" who becomes the most intolerant of other's shortcomings: less tolerant and more prideful. All too easily the faithful religious become neo-Pharisees; every creed, color and sex are represented among the smug and self-righteous.

And yet, when we step back to take in the scene in that dining room, Jesus is in the midst of all of them: the Pharisee, the woman, the other guests. What's missing from this scene? You and me. But we are there, in Jesus' mind's eye, we are there. Jesus manages to find himself on both sides of the tracks.

So, how do we hear him say, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace?" We begin with the knowledge that the peace of God is not the absence of sin and evil. It's not God's peace that promises to make all our hurt go away. Drug dealers promote that false religion. God's peace is that which passes understanding. God's peace transcends human experience. God's peace changes us, transforms our sinful wills into the desire to be obedient in any and all circumstances.

How do we come by this peace? Behold the woman. How intimate can you get with Christ? How much truth-telling can you allow yourself with him? How honest can you be with yourself? How boldly can you draw near him, even at the risk of coming out publicly, in love and adoration of him, as does the woman in the face of those who would judge her most harshly and unkindly?

Too many in the religious community get trapped into justifying ourselves based on a perception of being better than someone else. This is not the God of Jesus Christ who is being served. This is a false god, a religious idol who sells the appearance of righteousness, dealing in the counterfeit currency of simply living a good life. It may be a good life, but it is not the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus.

"This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1.15), *among whom we are*. In the paradox of faithful salvation, we need be thankful for our sinfulness, our humanity, our vulnerability, our weaknesses, our humility. Use them to be drawn nearer the Love of God. Confess your sins to God through Christ, who is the bridge to joy and peace. Let nothing create division between God and you.

At Baptism, we receive the forgiveness of sins. In faithful living, we *practice* forgiveness, both receiving and giving it. Everyday, we need enter and repeat the cycle of the forgiven and forgiving life. Everyday we need reflect on our actions, things done and left undone. Every day we need to self-examine, every day we need to repent. Every day we need to receive again God's forgiveness.

We are certainly being watched. People notice how we speak of others, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and those beyond the boundaries of active church life. Are you a sinner? Am I? You betcha. For which reason we draw near to Christ in faith, repenting and

believing, forgiving as we are forgiven, to hear him say those life-giving words as he does to the woman who was a sinner: "Your faith has saved you, go in peace," in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.