

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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June 12, 2016

Do you remember reading a story when you were three- or four-years-old? When we were younger we often wanted to know what happens next in a story. We wanted to know: where did they move, or was the baby born? As we begin reading novels we begin to learn that focusing on the plot alone may cause us to miss out on the meaning. Eventually we learn that sometimes stories are less about *what* happens and more about *to whom* things happen.¹

In today's gospel reading we have two main characters to explore, specifically a nameless woman and Simon. This nameless woman is only called a sinner. She's neither a prostitute nor Mary Magdalene, so let's get both of those misinterpretations out of our head. She did, however, interrupt a dinner party with her unusual behavior. As one scholar put it, "The question isn't *whether* people will say something, but *what* they will say." Then, Jesus tells a parable. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that this parable is an analogy about the woman. Apparently she has been forgiven much, which explains why she devoted herself to Jesus. She was overcome by gratitude. Really? I mean, can forgiveness really be like that? I feel a little sheepish admitting that I don't wipe people's feet with my hair after I'm granted forgiveness. Do you?

¹ http://www.ttms.org/say_about_a_book/character_matters.htm

The theologian David Lose says, “Consider: forgiveness at heart is the restoration of relationship. It is releasing any claim on someone else for some past injury or offense. That’s why the analogy to a debt works so well. Forgiveness cancels relational debt and opens up the future. Which is why it’s so important, so valuable.

But it’s also something more. Forgiveness also gives you back yourself.” You see, after a while, being indebted, owing others, feeling guilty or unworthy can define you. Eventually you become only what you’ve done, only the mistakes you’ve made, only the debt you owe. Then, when you are forgiven, all those limitations disappear and you are renewed, and set free.² Today’s story has everything to do with forgiveness, and the gratitude it creates.

David Lose reminds us that: “it’s also about something else: it’s about hardness of heart as opposed to love, about judgment instead of forgiveness, and about a sense of entitlement instead of gratitude.” If it were only about forgiveness then telling that short parable would have been enough, but Jesus doesn’t stop there. “Instead, he compares her actions of extravagant hospitality with that of Simon’s. He changes his focus...from her devotion to Simon’s neglect. It’s not that Simon would have been expected to wash Jesus feet with his tears. It’s that her extravagance only magnifies Simon’s utter lack of hospitality.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2601>

Why this change of focus? Because the truth Jesus points to cuts both ways. It's not only that one who has been forgiven much loves much from gratitude, it's that the one who is forgiven little loves little." To be clear, it is not that they have been forgiven less, but rather that they don't notice their forgiveness as much. "Perhaps they don't even think they need it. Who knows – perhaps they even disdain forgiveness as something for others, for those like this woman who is clearly a sinner, clearly beneath them, and so clearly in need of forgiveness. But them? Need forgiveness? Hardly! And so it goes. **If we cannot admit our need, we cannot receive the remedy for our lack...** This certainly seems to be Simon's situation. He has invited Jesus over but shows him no hospitality ... And rather than be taken aback by the woman's show of love, he judges both her and Jesus. He is a man who has no sense of being forgiven – even of needing forgiveness – and so is trapped in a judgmental hardness of heart."³

I must admit that I didn't fully understand this parable until this week. Sure, I've gotten the whole forgiving the sins of this woman and her gratitude, but I totally didn't see Simon as the flip side of the response to forgiveness. It wasn't until I learned of Brock Turner that I really understood Jesus' message.

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2601>

For those of you who don't know Brock Turner, he is a 20-year-old former Stanford swimmer. Recently he was convicted of three charges of felony sexual assault after being found behind a dumpster with an unconscious 22-year-old woman. This week we learned that he was sentenced to six months jail time. Mind you, a maximum sentence could have been 14 years. This case has sparked debates regarding our culture of rape. Numerous conversations have begun on the privilege of being a wealthy, well-educated, white, straight, male in America given his minimal sentence compared to those with similar convictions. The media is in the spotlight, as well, for how they used language and pictures almost softening the tone for this white boy. What rings true to me about this case in relationship to today's gospel message, though, is the letters that I've read from both the victim and Brock. When you read Brock's statement to the judge he has a strong feeling that his wrongdoing was participating in a "party culture" where he drank too much and had promiscuous sex.⁴ In the victim's letter, however, she is clear that Brock does not understand the nature of consent and basic respect for others. She says, "You are guilty. Twelve jurors convicted you guilty of three felony counts beyond reasonable doubt ... I thought finally it is over, finally he will own up to what he did, truly apologize, we will both move on and get better. Then I read your statement." She says, "This is not a story of another drunk college hookup with poor decision making. Assault is not an accident. Somehow, you still don't get it. Somehow, you still sound confused."⁵

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/08/us/document-Defendantstatement.html?version=meter+at+1&module=meter-Links&pgtype=article&contentId=&mediald=&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click>

⁵ https://www.buzzfeed.com/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra?utm_term=.mxPvyJ54j#.aqkEdzm6B

This, my friends, this sounds a lot like the story of Simon. Even in face of evidence, experience, and examination, still Simon cannot see. Simon and Brock still don't get it.

Now, in both these stories it's pretty easy to realize that both Simon and Brock are the bad guys here. Simon is judgmental and not really into Jesus, and Brock still doesn't seem to understand the full nature of what he did. Naturally we find ourselves judging them both. Here's the thing though: as we turn to pick up a stone to throw at both Simon and Brock we catch a glimpse of ourselves in the mirror. You know what we see? The rock in our hand looks more like a boomerang than a stone. We are Brock. We are Simon. Some of you won't like hearing that; I know I don't. In fact, I don't like Luke at all right now because I am reminded that I am a sinner, and you are a sinner. Sinners? Really? Not here in Wicker Park? How can I be a sinner? Before I give you some thoughts about this I'd like us to sit with this for a moment: how are we like Simon, maybe even how are we like Brock? When you're ready, pull out that quarter sheet of paper in your bulletin and jot down a few words, phrases, or sentences. Take some time to ponder – how are you like Simon? How are you like Brock?

I know I am like Brock because I've been raised by a sexist, classist, and racist culture that values certain types of people over others, and frankly I haven't done my best to change it because, well, I benefit from it. My skin color, my sex, my transcript from Yale, these all benefit me and so I turn apathetic. I am like Simon because I am also a Christian leader in a religion that for far too long has sought to limit access to information. In my experience, my religion has tried to withhold information about sex and sexuality from youth, at times arguing for abstinence only while failing to explain the basics of consent.

One author says, I am like Brock because "Because I too have been raised by a racist and classist culture that tells me my worth is so immense, that I do not have to stop my actions at any point to consider their impact on others."⁶ So, before you cast the first stone at Simon or Brock, maybe you need to look into the mirror and see that you too are Brock, and you are Simon.

You see, as David Lose puts it, this gospel story tells both halves of the truth: the joyful truth that those who recognize their need for forgiveness can live out of gratitude and love, and the tragic truth that those who believe themselves righteous or sufficient on their own never know the joy of receiving forgiveness and miss authentic gratitude and love.

⁶ https://medium.com/@Chris_Messinger/this-morning-i-had-a-brush-with-infamy-i-saw-brock-turner-when-i-was-biking-to-work-32cc1d141b1e#.splo8da85

This gospel story today, reminds us that we must open our eyes wide to the world around us and recognize our own need for forgiveness before we can live in gratitude. Now take another moment to think about how you've been Simon or how you've been Brock, and then think what might it look like to be that nameless woman. Take a few moments to ponder and write down what living a life like her might look like – a life that recognizes our need for forgiveness and then lives a life of gratitude. (A few moments are given to all, before some are asked to share.)

This periscope is part joyful and part tragic. It reminds us of the kingdom of God. We're reminded that our God offers us abundant forgiveness, and that's today's good news. You'll notice that the forgiveness offered to this woman is not dependent upon her actions. Look at verse 47 in your insert - this translation here is on-point, by the way. It says, "I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." You see the love she showed was the not the basis of her forgiveness, but the love she showed was the effect of being forgiven. In other words, she didn't do anything to receive forgiveness; rather she loved because she *already was* forgiven. If you've been in the WPLC Basics class this sounds a lot like strong Lutheran theology!

Here's the thing: "forgiveness is not the end. It is only the beginning." Forgiveness is freedom. Sure, it's freedom from our own fear of eternal damnation and divine retribution, ***and*** it's freedom *to* something as well. As one theologian puts it, "Freedom to fix our mistakes, to work for reconciliation, to choose every day never to take even one step down the same path that might wound someone again."⁷

That is why many weeks we gather here to take pause and confess our sins. To really emphasize confession today we will do it following the sermon today. In the silence during confession we examine ourselves with "eyes wide open." We hear the question of Jesus ask us, "Do you *see* this woman?" We ask ourselves, "Where have we failed to see?" Then we're reminded that it's not what we do that grants us forgiveness, but that it's God's free gift. However, confession and forgiveness are only part one of the equation. Part two comes when we are fed with the gifts of God at this table and then sent into the world to reconcile systems of injustice, to acknowledge our imperfections, and to work for justice.

My friends, today you're reminded that you are forgiven, like it or not. Even if you think you don't need it, you are forgiven. With that in mind, now you've got a choice – are you going to resent or even ignore your forgiveness like Simon, or are you going to respond to that love like this nameless woman? You've got a choice to make. My prayer for you is that you share God's love this day and always. I hope you help us find ways to dismantle our destructive culture. I pray that you remember that you're not alone, for our God's mercy makes all things new. Amen.

⁷ <http://emmykegler.blogspot.com/2016/06/do-you-see-this-woman-preaching.html>