

YOUR GREATEST NEED

Our text for today's sermon is the Gospel lesson from Luke 7:36-50. We listen again to verse 48.

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Dear Friends in Christ,

A number of years ago, when I was pastor of a large inner-city congregation, I was invited by my Alderman to attend a memorial service for a prominent civic leader. A number of speakers addressed those who were present, but the main speech, the eulogy, was delivered by a well-known Jewish Rabbi.

The rabbi told the story of a person who asked three men to go to the king in his behalf. The first man said no. The second man said yes. He went to the palace, but he stopped at the gate and wouldn't go in to see the king. The third man said, "I will go to the king, and I will plead your case."

The rabbi explained, "Going to the king is like going to God at the time of death. The first man represents our possessions. They cannot speak to the king. The second man represents our family. They come with us to the grave but can go no farther. The third man is our good deeds which plead our case before the king." The rabbi then spent the next half hour talking about the many good deeds which the deceased civic leader had accomplished.

I was tempted to jump up and demand equal time for the truth but I didn't. Over the years, this incident has remained in my memory. It was so bad. It was so wrong. I know that some of you have heard me tell this story before. From time to time I use it as an example of the public proclamation of a false teaching.

What this deceased civic leader already knew by the time of his memorial service, what the rabbi would know himself someday, is that when you stand before the King some day, your greatest need is not a lifetime of good deeds. Your greatest need is the forgiveness of sins. A lifetime of good deeds, according to the Prophet Isaiah, a lifetime of good deeds, all our "righteous" acts, are like a pile of stinking, filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6). The only way to stand before the holy and just King, the King who hates sin and punishes sin, is with the forgiveness of sins.

The forgiveness of sins is obviously your greatest need then, at the moment of death, but it is also your greatest need now, in this life. Because the forgiveness of sins gives you peace with God, whom you can then approach as your loving heavenly father. It takes away the fear, the terror of death.

Unfortunately, not everyone realizes that the forgiveness of sins is our greatest need. Our text today tells of two people, Simon the Pharisee - a religious and community leader, and The Woman - the one who had lived a sinful life. Jesus loved them both. Only one of them had a deep love for Jesus. Both needed the forgiveness of sins. Only one realized it. Only one was grateful for it.

Verse 36 *Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.*

We don't know why Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner in his home. Maybe he wanted to see a miracle. Maybe he wanted to hear a parable or a story. Maybe he wanted to observe a healing. Maybe he wanted to trick or trap Jesus on some point of doctrine with a rigged question. We do know that Simon was not a gracious host. It was expected in those days for a host to greet his honored guest with a kiss of peace, to give him water to wash his dusty feet and to provide oil for the head and skin. Simon didn't do any of these things. He kept his distance from Jesus.

While the dinner was in progress, a woman "*who had lived a sinful life in that town*" entered the room. She was known throughout the entire community as a woman of "questionable" character, a woman with an immoral lifestyle. (Nowadays with our society's glorification of such sins, she'd probably be given her own reality show on TV.) Back then, when people still recognized that conduct in direct opposition to the sixth commandment was a sin, she was probably the subject of endless vicious and derogatory gossip.

Maybe she heard Jesus speak publically. Perhaps she had listened to his message when he associated (as he often did) with publicans and sinners. Maybe she was even the woman out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons. Obviously she had heard the Gospel message of pardon, peace and forgiveness, and she trusted Jesus for pardon, peace and forgiveness. She had recognized her need for forgiveness and her need had brought her to the Lord.

Jesus was reclining at the table on a low couch, as the people of his culture did in those days. He was resting on his left elbow so he could use his right hand to eat. His feet were stretched out away from the table. The woman went to Jesus' feet sobbing. Her tears of remorse bathed his feet. With her long hair she wiped his feet dry. When she had completed this humble act, she anointed Jesus' feet with expensive, perfumed ointment. She was showing her love for her Savior. She was showing gratitude for his undeserved mercy toward her.

Simon the Pharisee thought to himself, "Why would a prophet allow such a woman to touch him? Either Jesus doesn't know what kind of woman this is so he isn't much of a prophet. Or he does know what kind of woman this is and he permits her to touch him so he lacks the holiness of a prophet." But Jesus knew Simon's thoughts. He could read Simon's mind. So he told him a parable, a parable that not only explained the woman's actions, but also was a loving call for Simon to repent.

"One man owes a creditor two month's wages. Another man owes the same creditor wages of 1½ years. Neither man can pay so the creditor cancels both debts. Simon, which of the two debtors will love the creditor more?" Simon says, "The one who had the bigger debt cancelled."

Jesus applied Simon's answer to the actions and motivation of the woman and to Simon's own actions and motivations. Jesus said, where there is only a little love or where there is no love shown for the Lord at all, this is a sign, an indication that little or no forgiveness has been received. Verse 47 "*. . . he who has been forgiven little loves little.*" People who don't show love for the Lord are people who either don't know about what the Lord has done for them or people

who don't care about what the Lord has done for them. Either way, those are people who are probably still caught in their sins with no way out in sight.

Now don't get confused by the awkward English translation of the first part of verse 47. There Jesus said, *"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much."*

No, the woman's acts of love did not bring about her forgiveness. The forgiveness came first. The acts of love were her response to that forgiveness. In the parable, the creditor cancels the debt first, then the debtors show their love. It will give us a more accurate picture to use the wording of the second half of verse 47 to explain (in parallel) the wording of the first half of verse 47. In the second half Jesus says, *"... he who has been forgiven little loves little."* We are correct in supplying the obverse. He (or she) who has been forgiven much loves much. Where much has been forgiven, there will be a display of much love.

Gratitude for forgiveness displays itself in the life of a Christian. The knowledge of sins forgiven shows itself in the life of a Christian.

As a host, Simon the Pharisee treated Jesus rudely. He didn't even bother to offer Jesus the simple, common courtesies of the day. He didn't love Jesus very much. Why? Jesus says it's because he was "forgiven little." This doesn't mean that Simon had no sins to be forgiven. It doesn't mean that Simon had lived his entire life in the way God had instructed. No, Simon was a sinner just like you, a sinner just like me. Simon needed a Savior from sins just like you, just like me. Simon had a lot of sins that needed forgiveness. He just didn't know it. He just didn't know that the forgiveness of sins was his greatest need. He just didn't know or he just didn't understand or he refused to believe that Jesus came into this world to be the Savior of sinners.

When Jesus was executed on the cross of Calvary, God the Father used that innocent death to pay the debt that Simon owed for his many sins. In fact, on the cross of Calvary, Jesus died to pay the debt for all the sins of the whole world. But Simon didn't receive this forgiveness because he didn't see himself as a sinner. He didn't see a need or refused to see a need for anyone to die for him. He didn't realize that his greatest need was the forgiveness of sins.

The forgiveness of sins is your greatest need too, whether you recognize it or not, whether you listen to your conscience or not. The forgiveness of sins is your greatest need too. The Bible tells us clearly: *"... there is no one who does good, not even one."* (Psalm 53:3 NIV). *"... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."* (Romans 3:23 NIV). In the language of the parable, we are all debtors for whom much debt has been forgiven.

The forgiveness of sins, God's greatest achievement, your greatest need, is NOT dependant on what YOU DO. Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.* God's grace, his love and his mercy, saves you through faith in Jesus. This very faith is the work of the Holy Spirit within you to bring you to trust in Jesus for your salvation.

Faith in Jesus is tied to salvation because, at the moment the Holy Spirit works faith in your heart, (for most of us in the waters of baptism) you get the full benefit of Jesus' life, his death and his resurrection. From the moment the Holy Spirit works faith in your heart, for as long as you remain in the faith, every one of your sins is pardoned, it is fully and freely forgiven. Forgiveness can't be earned. No one could ever do enough to merit forgiveness. Forgiveness

can't be bought. No one could ever pay enough. Forgiveness is free to all believers in Christ Jesus. If you trust in Jesus as your Savior, you have the forgiveness of sins already. (Acts 10:43).

The woman at Simon's house was responding, in love, to God's forgiveness of her sins. You, too, can respond in love to God's gift of forgiveness. The woman showed her love, her gratitude, her appreciation boldly and publically, and so can you. Now, how do you do that? How do you show your love for Jesus? He says quite simply in John 14:15 (NIV) *"If you love me, you will obey what I command."* You can show your gratitude and love by obeying what Jesus commands, by striving to conform your life to God's Will as summarized in the Ten Commandments. That's the Third Use of the Law, using God's commands as a GUIDE for your life, motivated out of love for him. (First Use = CURB, Second Use = MIRROR, Third Use = GUIDE.)

Now, more specifically, you can show that you value the forgiveness of sins by receiving the forgiveness of sins often, publically, with like-minded believers in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In the Lord's Supper you also receive the assurance, through the presence of the very body and blood of Christ, the assurance that your sins have been paid for in full by Christ's body and blood.

You can show that you value the forgiveness of sins by turning away from sin, by walking away from those things you do that are contrary to God's Will. If you have a pet sin or a secret sin, it may not be easy to break yourself out of the habit of that sin. But forgiveness IS NOT permission to go on sinning. Forgiveness IS remission of sin, the sending away of sin. God's great love moved him to sacrifice for your sin. God's great love is your motivation to turn away from sin and to turn toward a life that pleases God.

Another way that you can show that you value the forgiveness of your sins is to forgive others, forgive others as you have been forgiven. When you consider the enormous number of your egregious wrongs that God has forgiven you, you are led to forgive the petty slights and the minor hurts you receive from family or friends. 'Whoever has been forgiven much loves much.' You can show your love for the Lord by showing love to others, even those who have done you wrong.

Most importantly, you can show that you value the forgiveness of sins by living like someone whose sins have been forgiven. You can display in your life the changes that occur in those who know that their sins are forgiven: a conscience that is neither troubled or distressed but a conscience that is free of guilt, assuaged and soothed, a heart that is not anxious or apprehensive but a heart that is calm and trusting, a life that is lived at peace with God, a life that looks forward to death with a smile.

Because someday, when you appear before the King, you won't be relying on your wealth or your family or your good deeds, through faith in Jesus you will have the one thing that you need most, the forgiveness of sins. Amen.