

Trinity Cathedral Sermon
June 13, 2010 The Third Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev. Canon Marianne Borg

There are many ways of doing Bible study; there are many ways of encountering the Scripture stories...many ways of reflecting...many ways of dialoguing with the Scriptures...and some ways--some methods--are a little more responsible than others. To reflect on the Gospel today, I want to return to the Collect. In our tradition, often the Collect gives us hints about the themes that are in the Scripture texts, particularly in the Gospel. So I want to return to the Collect for today because as I read the Collect, and then looked at the Gospel, I actually saw the Gospel in a very different light. And it led me to reflect on it in a different way today.

The Collect: "Keep O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion, for the sake of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever." "Keep O Lord your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love." As I returned to the Gospel, I wondered how this Gospel might be talking to us about the nature of the household of God. So bear with me this morning. I would like to suggest that the two primary characters in today's Gospel--the Pharisee, and woman in the city--represent two different embodiments of how the household of God acts. Or what the household of God thinks is appropriate, in being in the presence of Jesus, and that qualifies them as being in the presence of Jesus.

First let me say a little something about the Pharisees. Unfortunately, they get kind of a bad rap, I think. The Pharisees were scholars. They knew the Law. They loved the Law, and the Commandments. They knew and respected Torah. They knew the Scriptures. They were dedicated, and disciplined, and for them to know the Law, and the nature of the Law, and to live by it, was really important. This was part of the way that they showed their devotion to God. And for them, there was a lot of integrity in this. So, the Pharisees were strict and disciplined of mind and heart.

The woman in the city...we don't know very much about her, actually. I think that we assume, when we hear this story about the woman who comes to Jesus with the alabaster jar...I think we assume that she was a prostitute. At least, that's kind of what I've heard said about this text. The story of the woman coming to Jesus with the ointment, incidentally, is in all Gospels--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And there are some differences in the four Gospels. But in none of them, is it said, that she was a prostitute. It simply says that she was a woman in the city...not even from the city...in the city! So our hunch that she is a prostitute...what we do know is that she was a sinner...(I mean, who isn't?)...she was a sinner, and that she sinned alot. And what we have tended to think about this woman...and especially a woman who lets her hair down...is that she must have been a prostitute. There is no indication of that in any of the texts. She was a woman in the city, and she was a sinner.

And being a woman in the city--not accompanied by a male--puts her in somewhat of the outcast category. Usually in the first-century world, a woman could not be seen in public without a male escort. So the fact that she came to the Pharisee's house, unescorted, said she was probably marginalized. So she may have been landless...she may not have had a home...who knows...all of that is speculation. But she was probably somewhat of an outcast, and the fact that she came to the Pharisee's house so boldly, she had quite a bit of chutzpah besides.

So...the Pharisee...and the woman in the city. Because of what the Collect drew my attention to today, it made me wonder...if they might be for us today...two characterizations of the nature of the household of God. Two different ways of being in the presence of Jesus. And what kind of "mirrors" might the Pharisee...and the woman if the city...be for us today. By the way, I want to mention that in this Gospel, the emphasis of the Gospel, is about how you love. The emphasis is not really about sin. It's about how you love.

So,,first in thinking about the Pharisee and the woman in the city. How do they see themselves and how do they see others? Well, the Pharisee knew that he was righteous...he knew the Law...he knew what was custom. And certainly, he knew the letter of the Law. And, I think for him, it was appropriate that he should invite Jesus to his house. But the way he looked upon the woman...he thought if Jesus were a prophet, like they say...can't he tell that this woman...she's traveling around in the streets without an escorted male...and he should know what the nature of this woman...what kind of a woman she is...and that he even allows her to touch him? Which...if she's in an unclean class...would make him unclean? So the Pharisee really takes exception to the fact that this woman is here...and that Jesus allows her to come to him.

The woman, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be overly preoccupied with her status, or her gender for that matter. Or the fact that she is in a Pharisee's house...and probably came uninvited. She comes boldly to Jesus. Now both the Pharisee and the woman in the city...they both want to be with Jesus. But they do it in very different ways. And the woman in the city comes boldly to be with Jesus. She wants to be near him, and actually, it's more about him, than it is about her...and her status...or will she be acceptable. There's something about Jesus that draws her. And we will see in a moment, passionately. And she comes to Jesus.

OK...the woman watered Jesus' feet with her tears. The Pharisee did not offer water for Jesus' feet. Not even water for Jesus' feet--which incidentally in first-century world, was a sign of hospitality. You have a traveler come into your home...you wash their feet as a sign of hospitality. We re-enact that on Maundy Thursday here at Trinity. So this was a custom. But the Pharisee did not provide that custom for Jesus. He knew about it, but he didn't provide it. The woman, watered Jesus' feet with her tears...which I think is a very evocative image. What are those tears about? The woman dried his feet with her hair. Now if we think about that image for a minute...it's actually very sensuous. She dried his feet with her hair. There's some eroticism in this. It was lavish...maybe some would think inappropriate. It was intimate. She gave of herself--her tears and her hair--in tending to Jesus' feet.

The Pharisee did not welcome him with a kiss...which was also custom. People would come, and you would kiss them on one side of the cheek, and then the other, as a way of welcome and greeting. The woman kissed his feet, which in a first-century context, is an act of profound gratitude. And very often, if you kissed someone's feet...it was in response to a pardon...or a sense of being accepted. It was indeed, an act of profound gratitude. The Pharisee did not anoint Jesus...give him anointing for his beard...or whatever. But the woman anointed his feet with the ointment, which was probably perfumed. She anointed his feet.

Now it's interesting to note, that the only other characters that anointed Jesus in all the Gospel reports...the only other ones that Jesus received an anointing from...is God and the Holy Spirit. And in so doing, God and the Holy Spirit in anointing Jesus, reflect his identity, and his authority. This woman in the city is the only account of someone anointing Jesus. And she anoints his feet. And in giving this response to Jesus, it is a response to his identity, and to his authority...to his presence.

Now...the Pharisee, and his actions...he knew the letter of the Law...he knows what is custom. Well, he knew what was custom, but he actually didn't live all of that out for Jesus. But he was a righteous man. Does his understanding of the letter of the Law, justify his behavior? Is he justified because he knew the Law? Paul would say "No." Because it is not by the Law that we are justified. We are justified by our love.

So...I suggest...might the Pharisee and the woman in the city...embody, represent, "mirror" for us...two different ways of being the household of God. In terms of how we think of ourselves, how we approach Jesus, what we think is appropriate, and also there are implications then for how we treat others. Probably with the same mindset. So might the Pharisee, and the woman in the city, be an image for us of the household of God? Remember--I took my cue from the Collect. I have never thought of the text this way before. My hunch is...for a lot of us, that we may actually identify with the Pharisee...a little more comfortably? He was decent and orderly. In fact, I even think that phrase is in the Book of Common Prayer somewhere...that we are, by nature, decent and orderly. We might be more comfortable with the kind of respectful, disciplined manner of the Pharisee. We may not be therefore, as comfortable with the behavior of the woman...sensuous...extravagant...risky...trusting...defenseless.

Two depictions of the manner of the household of God? We can decide. "Keep O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion." Now what constitutes the truth? What constitutes justice? What are its requirements? Well, as a community, we struggle with this question all the time. What then, is the truth? How are we to proclaim it? With boldness. What is justice? What does that look like, and require from us? We are to exercise that with compassion. What is truth? What is justice? We struggle with that all the time. We continue to ask that question all of the time. That is our work. "O Lord, keep your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love."

Now...regardless of whether or not you buy the possibility that the Pharisee and the woman in the city might be “mirrors” for us about the household of God...I want to remind us all, that the household of God--the church--has always been understood as the Body of Christ. It is to be an embodiment of the nature and character of God. How are we doing? The church is the Body of Christ. We are the Body of Christ. How do we embody the nature and character of God? How do we incarnate it...live it out? We may not fully identify--or want to be mirrored by the Pharisee, or the woman in the city. But we are decidedly to identify with Jesus. And he is our ultimate mirror for what it means to be the household of God.

To close...I want to read from a prayer. It's a meditation...a prayer of thanksgiving...by Symeon the New Theologian of the Tenth Century (949-1022). He was a Greek Orthodox abbot, theologian, poet. He was born in northern Turkey. His aim, in instructing his monks, was to lead his monks into a greater awareness of God's presence within them. That was his aim...to lead his monks into a greater awareness of God's presence within them. And I might add that he was a very controversial figure. And by the way, I think the woman in our Gospel knows this song of gratitude that we're about to hear. I think she knows it thoroughly...in her being. I actually think this is her story.

“We awaken in Christ's body...as Christ awakens our bodies. Then open your heart to him. And let yourself receive the One who is opening to you, so deeply. For if we genuinely love Him, we wake up. Inside Christ's body, where all our body, all over, every most hidden part of it, is realized in joy, as Him. And He makes us, utterly real. And everything that is hurt...everything that seems to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged...is in Him transformed, and recognized as whole...as lovely...and radiant in His light. We awaken as the beloved, in every last part of our body.”

May it be so for us.