**Forgiveness and Grace Transforms**

**Narrative Lectionary – Epiphany 7**

**February 19, 2017**

Luke 7: 36-50 Russell Mitchell-Walker

The scene is a court room. On one side is the defendant, a young man looking defiant even though he is handcuffed and shackled. On the other side are family members of the victims he murdered in cold blood only 12 hours before. A few of the family members come forward to speak. One by one, each person, sometimes speaking through tears, forgives the man for taking the life of their father, mother, sister, brother. There were gasps in the courtroom. How could they forgive this monster? But the speakers had learned long ago of the importance of forgiveness and at this moment those Sunday School lessons were being put to use.

This is a profound story of forgiveness, one that can be hard to fathom or understand. I wonder if it is similar to what Jesus’ guests might have been experiencing as well in today’s story as they were disgusted with the woman at Jesus’ feet, and shocked by his forgiveness. This woman, a known sinner to all gathered, comes into the home of Simon, as the men are all reclined for the meal which often would happen for a special meal or a major dinner. Part of the culture and the practice of reclining for dinner was that every person had a cushion that they would lean on. There was a table in the middle with various dishes that everyone could reach, so the heads of all the men were toward the center and their feet were out of the circle. Into this context the woman comes and kneels at Jesus’ feet, crying and wiping her tears with her hair and then anointing his feet with oil. It would have been custom as well that the host would wash the guests’ feet and even offer them oil for to anoint their head. Simon has not done this for Jesus, but the woman has. If Simon did this, it would have been expected, how she has offered it has been extravagant, as well as sensual. Much of what she did would have been seen as sexual, a woman letting down her hair is something usually only done in private, in the bedroom. She is showing her deep love and gratitude for Jesus.

There is speculation and indications that this is not their first encounter. That Jesus has already met her and forgiven her. This act of love is an expression of deep gratitude for the acceptance and grace Jesus has shown. Have you ever had that experience of grace and forgiveness that gives you a sense of gratitude and restores you to a renewed spirit? This is what happened for the woman – trapped in her life of sin, Jesus’ forgiveness offers her a different reality, a realization that she is of inherent worth, that she is loved, and that love liberates her from the life she was caught in. She is brought to life.

Jesus then tells a parable about two people who owe different amounts, one a day’s wage, one two years’ wages and both get their debt forgiven. The question of who will love the lender more is more about pushing Simon to see the woman beyond his perceived ‘deficiencies’ and see her potential, her worth. It is good news to see this hospitality extended to all regardless of the circumstance and is one of the marks of the Early Church. It is a parable of grace, and how we receive grace. The woman has loved much in response to the grace, the forgiveness she has received. How well are we able to offer grace or forgiveness to those who have offended us? Do we need to wait for them to feel sorry, to apologize? Real grace is when we can offer forgiveness before any sign of apology is offered. Like the family in the story who forgave the murderer. Offering that kind of grace can be transformative. It acknowledges the humanity and goodness, of the person, even when others’ may not see it. It can also reconcile, building love and gratitude. It builds community, a community of generous love and compassion.

Jesus builds community, not only by offering grace but by accepting invitations from people like the Pharisee, Simon. Generally we have come to know the Pharisees as ones who are against Jesus. They could even be viewed as enemies, the way they are portrayed. Yet we know that not all Pharisees fall into this category as Jesus was friends with Nicodemus in the Gospel of John and Jesus accepts an invitation from Simon. This Simon may see himself as superior to Jesus or he has an openness to learn from Jesus. We know from the conversation that there is respect, when Simon calls Jesus teacher. There are two possible perspectives to this visit. Jesus is open to listening and being with his perceived enemies. He is open to their hospitality and being in dialogue with them. The other reality is the recognition that not all in a group are the same. We can learn from both these perspectives, especially in these times. How willing are we to have conversation with those who hold radically different views than us? I know that not all in a group are the same and can change. I used to be very judgemental of conservative evangelicals but in recent years have learned that many are moving to a more inclusive and open theology as part of the progressive evangelical movement. So I am open to having conversation with and even welcoming evangelicals here, offering hospitality and grace that Jesus models. It is important to be open to dialogue with those with whom we differ. Yesterday I saw a tweet from my [Progressive Evangelical](http://www.theopennetworkus.org/about/) friend [Brandan Robertson](http://www.brandanrobertson.com/) who was visiting Washington DC: It said “Having dinner with family- 4 of which are Trump supporters. Taking time to listen and hear their view. It's hard. But the only way to heal.” You will have opportunity to hear and learn from the experience of this young visionary theologian as Brandan has agreed to offer worship and some study groups, for five Sundays in January and February as a theologian in residence next year for part of the time that I am on Sabbatical.

What Jesus did for the woman, was restore her humanity and dignity. He invited Simon, not just to look at her, but to see her – to see her as a person of worth and value. Jesus offers her God’s grace and love, helping her to see that she is loved and loveable. This is our calling too – to see those who are despised, rejected, outcast and offer them love and grace. It is the same as what God offers us, assuring us that we are loved, of inherent worth, and blessed. The Gospel work is not as much to make bad people good, but make dead people alive. God’s love and grace has the power to touch those who are dead inside. Those who feel unloved and inhuman because of their lot in life, or because of how they have been treated. Experiencing grace, God’s unconditional love and forgiveness can restore life to someone who has lost hope and is not really living. May you know that grace that restores us to wholeness. May we be open to hearing the stories and experiences of those different from us and expand our circle of love. May we embody the hospitality of the woman who anointed Jesus, and offer such love to all we meet.