

Sermon 061415 Identity

Scripture: Luke 7:36-8:3

Gen 1:27-31

Sermon Title: Who do you think you are?

One of the things that we need to remember about the Bible is that we have been reading those materials for 20 centuries through stained glass. We need to be reminded that the stories, like the one this morning, take place in a culture that is vastly different than our own.

Our Gospel story this morning is a vivid and fascinating depiction of a scene that teaches us about an important aspect of Jesus' ministry. There are a few finer points to add to the story, however, that will hopefully give us a little better sense of what was happening there. Let's start with the Simon the Pharisee. Pharisees were religious leaders of the Jews in the time of Christ. Simon invites Jesus to dine at his house, which means that Simon was a man of means. We learn that despite the invitation, Simon lacked in the story some of the acts of hospitality that were cultural norms. Hospitality was a major symbol of moral and ethical behavior among the Jews. People of honor showed it in their hospitality. Simon invited Jesus to dine, but as Jesus points out to Simon, Simon didn't offer the expected hospitalities. It would be like one of us not offering a seat or a beverage to a visitor to our home only much worse.

There is another little tidbit about that culture that is very different than ours that bears mentioning. We have ‘private property’ in this time and country. Our homes are our private space. Anyone who comes in to our home only comes if welcomed in. In the ancient near east, the private-public barriers that we take for granted, really didn’t exist. If you were having a dinner party for a person of notoriety like Jesus; people could just walk in to your house to see and listen to your guest. That is why the woman described as a ‘sinner’ was present at a dinner party in the house of a Pharisee. Also, if this scene is typical, the dinner was probably in the courtyard of the house and the guests, including Jesus, dined on couches around a low table, propped up on their left elbow with their knees bent and feet behind them.

I’d like us to look at the players in the scene by asking the question about each of them, “Who do they think they are?” We have three people playing out this scene- Simon the Pharisee, the ‘sinner’ woman, and Jesus. There are others present but these three are the action figures. The woman who had lived a ‘sinful life’ is uninvited. She is weeping so to wet Jesus’ feet with her tears. This had the effect of washing the feet of Jesus, which is one of the acts of hospitality that the Pharisee host neglected to do. She lets her hair down, an immodest thing to do in that world, to dry her tears off Jesus feet. She then anoints Jesus’ feet with the oil

that is in the pouch around her neck. Who did she think she was? She thought herself a sinful person who was truly sorry for her sins. She loved Jesus and hoped he would forgive her sins.

After his lack of hospitality, Simon the Pharisee judges both Jesus and the woman by doubting Jesus is a prophet of God simply because Jesus is allowing this kind of woman to touch him. Who did Simon the Pharisee think he was? He appears conceited, judgmental, and willing to condemn sinners. Simon thinks quite highly of himself and is comfortable putting himself above others.

Now, let's look at Jesus. Who did he think he was? Now before we appear arrogant to ask this question, remember, that is exactly the question that other people in this story asked about Jesus. In verse 49 the witnesses say, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Forgiveness was already a moral expectation among Jews in those times. It was however, taught that you forgive sins committed against you. That is still true to this today. Jesus, instead, came along and forgave sins committed against other people. Think of what that might have meant to the witnesses of this event. That's why the other guests were asking, 'Who does this guy think he is?' Well, what Jesus knew and we know but they didn't was that Jesus was on his way to the cross. Jesus went on from there and walked the talk and absorbed the

punishment for their sins and ours. Jesus knew who he was but, as usual in Bible stories, he was misunderstood.

This story shows in Simon and the woman a contrast between two attitudes of the mind and heart. The Pharisee thought he was better than he was, the woman thought she was worse than she was. Simon thought of himself as a good man in the eyes of men and God. He showed no need for forgiveness, no love and therefore received no forgiveness from Jesus. The woman was all about the need for forgiveness and love of Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” The Pharisee confused his privilege with his merit and the woman confused her sinfulness with her worthiness.

Now do these character traits remind you of anyone in your life? Who do you think you are? Is there a chance that maybe in your life you’ve thought too highly of yourself? Is there a chance that maybe in your life you’ve thought too lowly of yourself? (Raise hand) Guilty! I think I’ve been guilty of both unrealistically high self esteem and unrealistically low self esteem depending on where I was in my life, what was going on, and who I was with. This is, of course, typical but I think that I, and we, all tend to lean more in one of those directions than the other. Some of us tend to think that we are more virtuous than we really are and others tend

to think of ourselves as less virtuous than we really are. How do we bring the, “Who do I think I am” closer to reality?

Who am I? Who are we? Let’s get some help from Genesis, chapter 1, verse 27, “God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This verse, Gen 1:27, is the fundamental basis for our identity as humans and specifically as Christians. We are made in the image of God. All that we are and all that we do is in light of that statement. We are made in the image of God. Every one of us bears the maker’s mark, the maker’s image. We are in God and God is in us. Think of the implications of that when asking this morning’s question, “Who do you think you are?” If you want to see what God is, look in the mirror; but that’s just a partial image. Then look around you. Look at the other people in your world, in fact, look at the world and you begin to see what the creator had in mind in the first place. Anyone who rejects someone else rejects part of God. Anyone who puts themselves above anyone else is putting themselves above God. Anyone who feels that they are inferior feels that God is inferior.

God’s image: that is who we are. Our identity stems not from what we do, or from whence we come, or from what we have. Our identity is not ourselves; our identity derives from the one from whom we come, and the beginning of that is God. Now

despite our wondrous roots, we are fully human. We sin. All of us are sinners. That's the way it is, my friends. We all need forgiveness. We all need help. We all need Jesus Christ. That is what to see when we look in the mirror. The reality of who we are. We are all children of God who need God's love and forgiveness. If we remember that, we can avoid the Simon in us and we can avoid the 'sinful' woman in us. We can avoid the superiority and the inferiority complexes that dwell in us.

If we retain this little insight from scripture that we and everyone else are in the image of God and need God, nothing in this world can take that away from us. We will never look down on others or ourselves. Who do you think you are? If you understand and accept yourself as the image, the creation of God just like the rest of us, including the very world that we inhabit, then everything else will take care of itself.

AMEN