

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

June 17, 2007

Third Sunday After Pentecost - Proper VI

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

In today's Old Testament reading, we have a nasty piece of business going on. Ahab, King of a prosperous country in prosperous times, encounters the limits of his power. His neighbor Naboth refuses to sell him the vineyard next to the palace that Ahab covets as a kitchen garden. Naboth's refusal is final since he says the Lord forbid I sell my ancestral land. Ahab becomes totally dejected; even being king has its limits. But not for Jezebel! She comes from a background where the gods serve you rather than vice versa. That kind of theology leads to ethics where the self becomes all important and there are no limits on one's actions or appetites. Jezebel arranges that Naboth be falsely accused and convicted of sacrilege and treason. Naboth is stoned to death and Ahab gets his kitchen garden. To all the world this seemed entirely legal.

Jezebel and Ahab may have deceived the kingdom, but not God. God sends Elisha to Ahab to render God's judgment: the death and destruction not only of Ahab and Jezebel, but of all Ahabs descendants in a manner that is gruesome even by Old Testament standards. Their sins may have been deceit and murder, but the greater sin was exceeding the limits of their royal power and violating individual human rights. A king was sworn to protect God's people and to administer God's justice.

Jesus' reputation as "a great prophet" had obviously spread as we find him dining in the home of a Pharisee who is probably affluent by the standards of his day. In first century Palestine, the rich frequently invited teachers or other notables to dine as

honored guests and they were expected to “sing for their supper” by holding forth at the dinner. Such events were, unlike today, open to the public. The invited guests would recline on couches in the center of the room and the uninvited guests would sit on the floor along the walls and listen to and watch the proceedings.

Jesus was probably the honored guest at this feast. One of the uninvited guests was a woman, a notorious sinner in the town, who wept tears on Jesus feet, wiped them with her let-down hair and started continuously kiss and anoint Jesus’ feet. Respectable women didn’t go out alone in public and they certainly didn’t let down their hair and kiss strange men’s feet in public! The host was a Pharisee, a form of Judaism at the time whose adherents prided themselves on their piety and their strict observance of the Law. He was probably beyond himself to find the town prostitute making a spectacle of herself over a guest in his house! Not only that, but he was thinking he had a worthless prophet as the guest of honor. I mean, any fool with eyes in his head would know what kind of woman this was, let alone a prophet!

Jesus shows that not only does he know what the woman was, but also what his host was thinking. He poses the host an innocuous and rather lame question: who would feel the most love and gratitude – a debtor who had been forgiven a debt of 500 denarii (about a day’s wages) or one who had been forgiven 50? When the host gives the obvious correct answer, Jesus brings him into relationship not only with Jesus but also with the woman. He contrasts the great respect and affection the woman is showering on him with the meager welcome Simon, his host, has shown him. Unlike a truly welcoming host of his times, Simon did not offer the simple courtesies of water to wash one’s feet, a kiss of welcome and some perfumed oil for the head. This woman who is a notorious sinner and outcast bathes his feet with tears and wipes them with her hair. She anoints with precious oil not his head but his feet and she kisses not his cheek

but his feet! Jesus then delivers his zinger. He notes that the woman sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence, she loves much. She is unlike like someone to whom little is forgiven, who loves little.

Now, given the conversation, three guesses who that someone might be? Jesus has proven his host wrong on several counts. First, not only is he a prophet, but he is way more than a prophet –one who can forgive sins. This is not lost on the other guests. When Jesus says to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven,” the others comment, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” At that time, Jews believed that sin could only be removed by sacrifices of sin offerings at the Temple in Jerusalem pursuant to the Levitical code. Second, the host is mistaken in his assumption of his moral superiority over the woman in God’s eyes. Jesus implies that to God they are both the same – sinners who have been forgiven. They differ only in their recognition of that status and the love they feel.

Paul in his letter to the Galatians notes that we are saved not by our actions in fulfilling the old Levitical laws but by our faith in Christ, which allows us to see and experience what one of our hymns calls the wideness of God’s mercy. It seems many church people get all wrapped up in their piety that they overlook their shortcomings and their own need for forgiveness. Jesus called his host Simon on this. For Simon, Jesus was just a curiosity, a potentially amusing guest. In giving Jesus the most perfunctory welcome, Simon shows he holds him in little regard. Basking in his own righteousness under the law, Simon has little need for a prophet, let alone one who forgives sins.

The unnamed woman knew differently. We don’t really know much about her other than she was “known in the town as a notorious sinner.” It is quite possible that she chose her profession because she had no choice. In first century Palestine, there

were few choices for women and very few ways for a woman who lacked a supportive and protective family to survive. She would be considered religiously defiled and shunned by the community – at least during daylight hours. Can you imagine her isolation and torment? Can you imagine her sense of helplessness? And then along comes this man people were calling a prophet. This man saw her as a child of God. Perhaps she had already been welcomed into Jesus' circle of disciples and so now she had a place amidst people who called her sister or auntie.

Today's readings are in part about human vulnerability and our relationship to God and one another. Ahab and Jezebel refused to recognize their vulnerability – that as humans, even though a king, their power was limited by ethics and justice. They recognized their vulnerability only in judgment, a judgment brought on by their own behavior. Simon's vulnerability was in his hypocrisy which blinded him to his own need for God's love and mercy. While forgiveness and love were there for him, he could not see this. The woman's vulnerability was in her own situation and she could see that only too well. But this type of vulnerability allowed her to recognize in Jesus that it didn't have to be that way; that with God's grace it could be changed. Luke records here her love and joy at new life.

I think we all have at times bits of the overreaching Ahab, the self-righteous Simon and the hapless isolated woman in us. Being vulnerable enough to forgive and to accept forgiveness is the only thing that frees us to be ourselves and to live joyfully. The type of vulnerability that the woman had – to recognize the truth of ourselves and our lives, can't be faked. It takes courage