



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, October 13, 2019
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Evensong
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Mathew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Micah 6:1-8 and Luke 7:36-50
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The Supper of Pardon

We believe that Jesus' earthly ministry lasted about three years, so it would be fair to say that his time travelling, teaching, and healing would have included his presence at a thousand suppers, give or take a hundred. A thousand suppers, before his Last, in dining rooms that weren't his, at tables not made by Joseph. A great variety of people opened their homes to him. This was a notable aspect of his ministry. He broke bread with people and drank wine with both the most reputable and the most disreputable. This practice had a significant effect on his brand. He became known for this. People once asked the disciples, flabbergasted, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" This was as if to say, "Surely you understand how much of a liability this is? Do you not see how these associations only hurt what you are trying to do? It is one thing to eat with the sheep, but eating with the goats, too? Do this often enough and you will only have people speculating what sort of animal you might be." These concerns were not just those of busybodies. They were of people who were fundamentally concerned about issues of purity and righteousness in a time of darkness. There was a vivid strain of Judaism that believed that impurity and a lack of righteousness served to threaten the integrity of the entire nation, especially while living under occupation. They were hanging on by a thread, the conviction went. And sinners had a kind of contagion or radioactivity that was dangerous to be near. For the sake of yourself and especially for the sake of society, it was best to keep one's distance from notorious sinners.

Jesus was willing to take the heat on this point, time and time again. And it is within the scene of our Gospel reading for this evening that a teaching moment unfolds. It's in the lakeside settlement of Capernaum that he is dining at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

Now this supper would have played very well to the traditionalists of Capernaum. This Pharisee would have been an upstanding member of that community. He also would have been someone deeply interested in the sheep keeping separate from the goats, so to speak, for the sake of the health of the nation. But, despite his best personal efforts, someone crashes the party. The last person that Simon wants to see: someone that everyone knows, except for the wrong reasons. She barges in through the public door, uninvited, weeping, holding an expensive bottle of exotic ointment.

The evening is essentially hijacked because she falls on the ground at Jesus' feet and begins this anguished and intimate process: weeping hard enough to use her salty tears to wash Jesus' dusty feet.

She wipes his feet off with her own hair. And then takes his feet in her hands and rubs that precious balm into them. It must have taken some time, and would have been impossible to ignore. Simon holds his tongue about this. But it seems that he can't hold his facial expressions, because Jesus can tell what he was thinking: "If Jesus were a real prophet, he would know who this woman is, and would have stopped this. Now he is ritually unclean, and I could make the case that this entire evening has been sullied, both in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of God."

I suppose that Simon expected Jesus to recoil in horror. Instead, Jesus answers Simon's internal rebuke by showing him that her virtue is actually outpacing his. Jesus tells him a story of two people who were forgiven their debt. One owed ten times more money. And because the greater debtor was released of greater debts, it was clear to all, including Simon, that greater love and thanksgiving would have come from that person in response to greater forgiveness. Jesus notes that the woman is overflowing with love and thanksgiving, her faith is now greater than Simon's because of all that she stands to gain from forgiveness after falling so far.

And then, after this point is agreed upon, Jesus brings his parable to life. He forgives the woman on the spot, commending her for her faith, telling her that her faith is the reason why she has been rescued from her sins.

It seems that the reaction of the people at the table misses the point. We are told that their comment was "Who is this who can do such a thing?" Frustratingly, the reaction of the witnesses is less gratitude for a lost one being found, and more astonishment that the world doesn't seem to be working the way that they presume it should. For many, egregious sins are precisely those that shouldn't be forgiven.

But thanks be to God that Jesus declares God's perfect will and then does it. It is sin that sets the stage for God's forgiveness to take place. Indeed, in an astonishing cascade of spiritual progression, greater sin can lead to greater forgiveness which can provoke even greater love than would have happened otherwise! I don't think I meditate on this topsy-turvy reality often enough. Others have, though. And this wisdom has transfigured their lives. Seventeenth century historian, Thomas Fuller, praised God for how he could make our way to us through the "lucid intervals of a wounded conscience." He wrote that "praise for pensiveness, thanks for tears, and blessing God over the floods of affliction makes the most melodious music in the ear of heaven."

This is our great task in prayer: to ask God to give us a counter-intuitive turn of our inner eye, to see sin and tears and affliction not through our eyes, but through the eyes of Jesus Christ. As we witness tonight, Jesus is the one who finds sin and sinners, not to be occasions to recoil, not as occasions to attack or defend. In the presence of sinners, where Simon the Pharisee sees ruin and radioactivity, Jesus instead sees fertile ground for God's mercy to take root and grow. Where Simon sees a toxic waste dump, Jesus sees newly tilled soil.

Heaven help us to see with our Lord's eyes, for "even the darkness is not dark to you, O Lord." And with those eyes we may come to see a night that shines even brighter than the day.