

June 5, 2016

Scripture Lesson

Psalm 146

1 Kings 17:8-16

Sermon *"More than just Words"*

Luke 7:36-8:3

“One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.’

Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’

‘Teacher,’ he replied, ‘speak.’

‘A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’

Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’ Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages preaching and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God and the twelve went with him. And some women, who had been cured of evil spirits such as Mary, called Magdalene, from out whom seven devils went out of her, Joanna, the wife of

Chuza, Herod's steward and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources."

The usage of words has changed throughout the years. When I was a young, a person would receive general approval from the people if he announced he was gay. It meant he was happy, carefree, joyous and merry. Today, depending upon where it is announced, one might expect as many frowns as smiles.

Biblical words and theological words sometimes lose their meaning or impact when used in our 21st century culture. An example of this is the word; cistern. I recognize we live in a small town and most of you are older so most of you know what a cistern is. It is a word used several times in the Old Testament. Few people, other than country people or perhaps older people, know what a cistern is. A cistern is a receptacle for storing water; normally rainwater. In many old farmhouses the rainwater was channeled down the gutters into an underground holding tank. This water was not used for drinking, but was used for washing. It was soft water—not like hard water which came from a well and was used for drinking.

Words can become limp, meaningless, or even ugly in the course of the centuries. There are words that made perfectly good sense in their original context but which, over the years, no longer speak to us. They have to be pumped up by preachers, defined, explained in order to recover their voice.

Redemption, the word redemption, really had meaning in a society in which people were bought and sold into slavery, or sometimes could be bought out of slavery, and thus redeemed. To say that Jesus was a redeemer in such a culture was really to say something . But today?

Similarly, in a culture that, in the pagan cults, understood what it was to take some object from everyday life, pray over it, and transform it into something sacred, a word like sanctified had some meaning. Something ordinary was blessed from on high and made holy. To say someone has been sanctified was to say something about the radical transformation that had occurred in that person's life. But today?

Philip Yancy says there is one word in the bible that still speaks as vividly today as in its originating context. There is still one word that has no negative or inappropriate connotations.

The word is grace. We say that someone is most gracious and we all know immediately what we are talking about. We say that one of the greatest human emotions is the sense of gratitude. We, when we have been given a gift that we are truly grateful. Everyone still knows what those words mean, still loves the sound of them. Grace means gift, means love, means well—gracious. On the other hand to say that someone is ungracious, or to say that someone is persona non grata is

literally to declare that that person is ‘without grace’. The is a terrible thing to say about someone.

Philip Yancy asks, “Grace, gracious, graceful. Are there more beautiful words in our language?”

Yet you read the story like today’s gospel and you must ask if Yancy has got it right. Here is a story about grace, about gracious, expansive, inclusive love of Jesus. And as we’ve said, what is more beautiful than grace?

Odd then, that’s not the tone of this story. If it’s about grace, then why isn’t the story more gracious?

Jesus has been graciously invited to eat in the house of Simon—Simon the Pharisee. I say graciously because if you know something of these mealtimes with Jesus in Luke’s gospel, they don’t always go well. Often Jesus is critical of his hosts. Frequently there is rather bitter controversy around the dinner table when Jesus is a guest. So it is with grace that Simon has invited Jesus.

Jesus has preciousy accepted Simon’s invitation. Though he may have differences with Simon, Jesus is at Simon’s home, seated at Simon’s table.

But then a woman of the city shows up. Luke says the woman ‘was a sinner’ which is a bit odd since all of us are sinners. Past commentators have speculated fruitlessly over whether or not her sins were sexual. She was once labeled as a prostitute. But there is nothing in the story to suggest that.

I wonder if she is called ‘sinner’ simply because she is an outsider, someone who, unlike Simon and his friends, may know little about scripture, knows little about the fine points of theology.

So what a shock to Simon when this woman appears and fall all over Jesus, letting her hair down, kissing his feet, pouring sweet-smelling perfume upon him. All of which leads Simon to say “to himself” just loud enough for everyone at the table to hear him, “If this man were a prophet, a real prophet, he would be perceptive enough to see what kind of woman this is who is touching him.”

She’s a sinner. Prophets are in the business of identifying, naming and denouncing sin. Jesus calls himself a prophet, Simon thinks and doesn’t know what to do with sin and sinners.

Jesus speaks to Simon, telling him a little parable about two debtors who have been forgiven. One owned a small debt which was forgiven; and another who owed a spectacularly large sum and it was forgiven. Now think hard Simon, which forgiven man would have been the more grateful?

Simon reluctantly replies, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.”

I suppose? You suppose! Of course. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that the one who was forgiven much would be more pleased. Then Jesus turns on Simon, comparing his rather puny hospitality to that of the woman. Simon who

was so good, so righteous for which he has little to be forgiven; who doesn't feel too extravagantly grateful for Jesus graciousness, but on the other hand, the woman is so grateful, so filled with gratitude because of Jesus graciousness towards her. Now let's see the point. Normally we identify with someone in the story. Who were you? Who were you in this story? I would tell you, who I am- I would be Simon. I am a preacher, I am a religious person. The Pharisees were not priests, they were pompous lay people. So it is possible to say Simon the Pharisees would be one of you. You got out of bed this morning and came to church. You, too, are good at being religious. So I put it to you, just as Jesus put it to Simon: how does it feel to encounter the graciousness of God, the grace of a forgiving, loving God, when that graciousness is showered on someone who is a 'sinner, an outsider, not like us, not one of us?

When I lived in Texas there was a woman. She had killed someone, been found guilty and sentenced to death. While in prison she became a Christian, she gave her life to Christ and asked forgiveness for her terrible crime. Cynical people must have thought, "Everybody tends to get born again, saved, religious on death row"... If you were a member of the victim's family, if you were a member of that family, would you forgive her?

Yancy is right. The word grace is a sweet, beautiful, graceful word. Yet when that word is laid on someone else, say someone whom we consider ourselves superior to some sinner, well...how does grace sound now?

So we hunker down here with people like us. We prophesy by delineating the difference between the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous, the just and the unjust. Not too much extravagance here on most Sundays, not too many people out of control, falling all over ourselves with gratitude, just everything done decently and in order and according to the printed bulletin.

Yet the story reminds us. On Sunday, when we bless and break the bread, when we pour the wine, it's easy for us think of ourselves like Simon. We have hereby invited Jesus to dinner. No, that's not right quite right. For this is called the Lord's table, the Lord's supper. He is the guest who becomes the 'host'. We are here, not as serenely righteous who occasionally invite a prophet like Jesus to dine, rather we are here as graced sinners. We have been convened, invited by one whose idea of prophecy is considerably more expansive than our own. Then he tells us a story that defines the meaning of the word grace. His life restores a proper understanding to the word grace.

Grace is amazing as we love to sing. Yet, when it's God's grace toward someone else, well, the grace can be maddening.