

THE FEAST OF LOVE & FORGIVENESS
3 Pentecost, Proper 6, June 17, 2007
Grace Episcopal Church, Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today's Gospel presents us with three characters: Jesus; Simon the Pharisee; and, an unnamed woman. The setting is a dinner party, a meal. In Luke's story, the woman and Jesus have a powerful encounter. It leads to a confrontation between Jesus and Simon. In the parable Jesus shares, we are given the heart of Christianity ... the connection between love and forgiveness! Here we are this Sunday morning, gathered to celebrate a meal ... and hear words of love and forgiveness that are directed towards us.

Today is also Father's Day. It reminds me of meals ... and I sure hope you fathers out there get treated to a favorite meal! The idea came to me as I read Rev. William Willimon's reflection on today's Gospel. Family meals are important things. For many of us, it was the place we first learned about how to be in communion (or community). I remember my Dad packing us up every Friday night to drive from Syracuse, New York to my mom's parent's farm in Mansfield, Pennsylvania.

When we arrived, often late in the evening, there would be my grandfather sitting at the big dining room table ... waiting for us. Grandma would be in the kitchen warming up something for us to eat. The "ritual" would be the same. I would run over to my smiling grandfather, give him a hug and a big kiss on the cheek. Maybe this doesn't sound unusual, but my Grandpa Fish was a farmer. He was a huge man, just under 6-foot tall but weighing 250 pounds. He had a voice that could stop a bull when he shouted. He spent the day throwing 100-pound bales of hay around like a doll.

I can see the meals now. There would be Grandpa and Grandma across the table. My parents would be seated to the left at the end. My aunts would be seated to the right at the end. I was right between my uncles, Duane and Gary. That's where I learned to eat fast, between two hungry uncles that would help themselves to my food if I were too slow! The discussions ranged from the weather, to hunting, to crops, to farm equipment to politics. There would be an update on the family from Grandma central. Now, you have to remember that my mother was the oldest of 16, and I was the oldest grandchild of what would eventually be 78!

I learned a lot at that table. I learned that I belonged, I was loved and that home was a place that I could always go ... no matter what. My grandparents always had an open door to any of the family. Any of us could always come home, no questions asked, but where people were willing to listen, offer love, a bed to sleep and a warm meal. That model provided a model that I still this day carry into helping to shape a church community.

When we left the farm, I would see tears in Grandpa's eyes. The hug and kiss were given and the same questions always asked, "When will you be back?" How could someone not want to go back? This was a loving home. I hope this church can boast that same claim. I hope we can be that kind of place for as many people as possible.

What kind of meal and home do we encounter today in Luke's Gospel? Simon, the Pharisee, is one of the religious people of his day. We don't know why he invited Jesus to dinner. Maybe he wanted to impress his friends. Maybe he wanted to hear from this rabbi

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for himself (all the people in the surrounding area were talking about him). We never know why, but Jesus accepts the invitation.

Now imagine a dinner party ... and in walks an unwanted guest from the street! She is unnamed, but obviously knows Jesus. She has sought him out. With tears in her eyes, she shows Jesus great love. Jesus lets her be who she is ... and accepts her gift of hospitality. But there's Simon, the judgment rising in his mind and heart. You can almost hear him say to himself, "I'm better than this woman." Jesus knows what he's thinking.

Jesus offers the parable on the deep connection of forgiveness and love. He shows how the one that forgives little, loves little. He is making the comparison between Simon and the woman. Simon, who was so intent on living the way of the Law, ignored one of the basic laws of the Middle East. He failed to show his guest the proper respect by offering to wash his feet and anoint him with oil. Simon thought salvation came from following every minute provision of the law. But Jesus spent his life trying to point out to others, especially the Pharisees, that the Law was flawed.

Yes, the woman is a sinner. But who isn't? We have all sinned. Jesus acknowledges a woman who is broken, and offers acceptance, then forgiveness and love. She has found the way to salvation. Jesus shows us a new way of being ... one where we are loved and forgiven. It happens in the context of a meal ... the same thing is offered every Sunday to us in the meal of the Holy Eucharist!

Forgiveness and love are the way of God. This is what the Kingdom of God is all about. It's not a matter of how many laws we keep. It's a matter of being a community where we are accepted, loved and forgiven. But if this is the way for us as Christians? Why is it so hard for us? Maybe it means that we have to acknowledge we are sinners. Maybe it means we have to surrender control. Maybe it means we have to look at ourselves.

We also have to remember that forgiveness is not about changing the other ... but about changing us! It's about the creation of possible new relationships and new life. It's about letting go and letting God. When we gather as the Christian community, we have the model of that meal I experienced as a child. We are called to be a place of acceptance and love. We are called to be a place to share and discuss. We are called to be a community that is part of something bigger than ourselves!

In closing, I would share a story to remind us what we are all about. John Aurelio wrote a book called "Colors!" In it, he talks about the first parents, Adam and Eve. They were created on the sixth day. On the seventh day, they invited God to celebrate their birthday. They asked for something special as a gift. God reached into the great treasure chest and took out a sacred gold coin. Written on it was the word, "LOVE."

Well, we know the story. On the eighth day there was a snake and an apple and trouble. They were forced to leave the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve wanted assurance that God

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wouldn't abandon them. God said, "You have the coin." "But the coin says LOVE," they answered. "We have lost love, how will we ever find it again?"

God said, "Turn it over." On the other side of the coin was written the word, "FORGIVENESS." There is no love without forgiveness and there is no forgiveness without love. They are two sides of the same coin! This is what Jesus is telling us in Luke today! This is the kind of community that the woman and we are inviting into today! May we learn to live as the Church that has both sides of the coin working! Amen.