

Who is this one who forgives sins?

June 17, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

In today's Gospel, Luke (7:36-50) placed a parable within another story, providing us with two truths: the point of the story of the *woman of the city* is that *whoever loves much is forgiven much*; the point of the parable within it is that *one who is forgiven much loves much*. What a wonderful circle of benefit and lasting effect!

But there is another and larger question looming within the incident: *Who is this one who forgives sins?*

Following the Sabbath, Simon the Pharisee was giving a dinner party at which Jesus, the renowned teacher, was asked to attend. Simon was not even totally convinced that this man *wasn't* a prophet.

The party began swimmingly. Everyone sat around enjoying the party mix and punch. But, even before the main course could be served, this woman of the

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night came looking for the teacher bearing a bottle of perfumed ointment. Had she acquired this treasured substance through selling her favors? Surely, she couldn't offer such a gift to Jesus! Yet, it was clear that she intended to anoint his feet with it.

When she saw Jesus, she was so overcome that she began to cry. Her honest tears bathed his feet, and, forsaking modesty, she let down her hair and used it to dry his feet. Then she applied the ointment to them.

Caught between dread and desire, Simon gets a hold of himself and frowns on this seriously sensuous happening at his dinner table. He is as easy to read as an open book, so does Jesus respond to Simon's disdain by apologizing? By hustling the lady out the door and into the night? By insisting to Simon that such an embarrassing thing would never happen again? Jesus might have been like us in every way, but

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Scripture never says that he ever apologized, or that he ever blushed. And he certainly did not here.

At banquets or feasts, it was common for the host or guests to pose riddles for one another in a contest of wit and wisdom. So Jesus offers Simon a riddle that any five-year old could answer: the story of the two debtors, one who owed a little, and one who owed a lot. Guess who would love the creditor more? The one with the greater debt, that's who, Simon says.

Jesus loved to turn life examples into Kingdom truths. Call them *enacted parables* of the Kingdom reality. In effect, Jesus tells Simon that the Kingdom belongs to the *softhearted*. People with dried-up hearts, with hard hearts, with shut-up hearts, thick-layered hearts have a terrible time hearing the Gospel, let alone entering into the mystery of Divine grace. People cannot have a profound awareness of the sacred with hearts of stone. Why? Because their

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hearts—this central core of self--- is focused on the *finite*, on what they think they can control. And it dries out, closes up---shuts out the very lifeblood the heart needs: *the soft rain of God's love*.

If I am focused on my rightness, if I am focused on others' wrongness to support my sense of rightness, if I am focused on image and affluence and acclaim, then my heart, spiritually speaking, will petrify. I might have a fine EKG, but my *heart* will be *sick*. We might say that the central dynamic of Western culture *focuses our attention on the finite* as it centers our preoccupation on production and consumption. Hence we live on a surface level and our hearts are shut off not only to *treasure in heaven* but also to true human understanding and compassion. In a dog-eat-dog world, how do you survive with a *soft heart*?

There is a very useful metaphor for Gospel spirituality. It is the *hatching of the heart*. The heart is

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like an egg with a shell around it. If what is within this shell is to live, the egg must hatch, the shell must break, the heart must be open. If it does not break open, the life within dies and becomes stagnant and putrid.

Perceived blamelessness, coupled with *knowing* that another was an unclean sinner to be shunned, indicated that Simon had heart trouble. Not Jewish heart trouble, mind you, but *religious* heart trouble, as *Pharisees* exist in all types of religion. Was his heart *hatched* that night by Jesus and the woman of the evening? Did the parable stab at his heart and hatch it open? Did he come to know what it meant to be forgiven, or that he himself had any *need* for forgiveness? His response is never mentioned. We can only guess. But unless he changed and took on the open heart of a little child, he would never become a follower of Jesus.

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I ran across this little rhyme:

“He is a sinner,” you are pleased to say.

Then love him for the sake of Christ, I pray.

If on his gracious words you place your trust-

“I came to call the sinners, not the just”-

Second his call; which if you will not do,

You’ll be the greater sinner of the two.

John Byrom (1692-1763)

Just ask Simon. He found himself in that unhappy position.

AMEN.