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Pentecost 6C
Peace, Seattle
June 16, 2013
1 Kings 21:1-21, Luke 7:36-8:3

FROM SHAME TO GRATITUDE

Call it fate, call it poor timing, call it irony, call it what you want, the lectionary, on this Father's Day puts us face to face with two texts with two abysmally poor male role models: the selfish, sulking Ahab and the judgmental, self-righteous Simon!

Not exactly the kind of men we hope to emulate—or to lift up before our kids—eh fathers?

The first lesson reads like reality TV at its worst: a covetous power broker and his scheming spouse hatch an underhanded plot to steal life and property from an innocent victim… (and all for the sake of a vegetable garden, no less!)

When Jezebel's scheme against Naboth succeeds, Elijah delivers the message, in graphic terms, that this treachery cannot be hidden from the LORD; justice will be done.

> IN THE PLACE WHERE DOGS LICKED UP THE BLOOD OF NABOTH, DOGS WILL ALSO LICK UP YOUR BLOOD, Elijah tells Ahab.

Not the most appetizing image as a lead in to a Father's Day barbecue!

Yet, this story should not be all that shocking to us. For from ADAM on down, we simply won't find any unsullied male figure—father or not—who can be touted as an ideal role model, without flaws, without regrets, without a past in need of redemption. They all have feet of clay.

On the one hand, this is disappointing. We were hoping for better—from the Bible no less!
But on the other hand, we can say THANKS BE TO GOD—'cause if the people of Scripture aren't perfect, maybe I don't need to be perfect either. **I'm allowed to be human**.

Let's turn to the gospel, and see where being human takes us.

Jesus is famous for going to dinner parties in Luke's gospel. In fact, when it comes to invitations to share a meal at somebody's house, he seems completely incapable of saying NO. This willingness to be with any one at any time earned Jesus a reputation as a glutton and worse.
HE WELCOMES SINNERS AND EATS WITH THEM! They'd say.

This time, the dinner isn't at the home of some ne're to well, but at the home of a Pharisee named Simon.

And as they're reclining at table, a woman off the street—unnamed, uninvited, and unwanted—manages to slip past security and into the all-male gathering where she places herself at Jesus' feet, and begins to make a spectacle of herself.

We know next to nothing about this woman—only that she is a "sinner."
Luke calls her "a woman of the city" and apparently she has a reputation of sorts. But whatever the nature of her sin, this woman has lived her life in the margins. She has been looking for a way back to the center, back to the heart of God, and she's found it in Jesus.

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This story is one of my favorites from Luke's gospel. Every gospel writer includes a scene like this, but in the other three the story comes just before Christ's crucifixion and the woman's actions in those stories are connected to that fact.

But today's story is set early in Luke's gospel, before Christ's passion comes into play.
And there's a detail that caught my eye this time around that I hadn't really picked up on before.
It's found in verse 47, where Jesus is speaking to Simon about the woman, and he says:
THEREFORE, I TELL YOU, HER SINS, WHICH WERE MANY, HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN.

Not, HER SINS, WHICH ARE MANY, but HER SINS, WHICH WERE MANY.

What I find remarkable about this—to dig a little deeper into the grammar for a moment—is the tense of the verb "have been forgiven."

1. First, the verb is passive, which means that she did not cause the action; the action—being forgiven—came to her from outside herself, from beyond herself.
2. Second, the verb is in the "perfect" tense.[1] This means both that her present state of being forgiven is a result of past action AND that this forgiveness she's experienced will go with her, will accompany her into the future.

What this implies, when you add it all together, (and this is what so intrigues me…) is that this is not the first encounter this woman has had with Jesus. Something between her and Jesus has happened OFF STAGE if you will, out of view, prior to this story, that has brought about her forgiveness.

And now, having learned that Jesus is at Simon's home, she goes to great lengths to find him and initiate this extravagant gesture of gratitude in response to what he has done for her:

Kneeling at his feet, she unstops the flask of ointment and with a vocabulary of tears and hands and hair, says THANK YOU to the one who taught her to see herself not as a lost cause, but a precious daughter of God.

Her actions aren't an appeal for Jesus love, but an expression of gratitude for what's already been given and received.

His parting words to her sums it up: YOUR FAITH HAS SAVED YOU, HEALED YOU, MADE YOU SAFE, MADE YOU WHOLE; GO IN PEACE.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus wants nothing more deeply than to say these same words to you and me; and to bring us to say, with St. Paul, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

In Jesus, God reaches into our lives and says:
You are my sister, my brother, my own.
No matter how you may have failed as a father, mother, spouse or friend…
No matter how deeply others may have failed you, I'm giving you the chance to begin again.

Jesus meets us exactly where we are, however we are, accepts us and invites us in.
His amazing grace opens us up to the transformative power that comes from knowing we are loved and that in him our sins, though many, are forgiven.

And there's more…

[1] Consulted in: http://www.biblestudymanuals.net/new_testament_greek.htm

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For after this forgiveness has begun to sink in, the question then becomes:
Now that I am free from what once held me captive—how am I going to live my life?

The answer to that question illustrated by the woman in today's gospel is: with gratitude.

And, if we're to follow her lead, not only a quiet, personal expression of gratitude, but a gutsy, risky, public expression of gratitude.

Not that there's anything wrong with a personal, interior expressions of gratitude. But what the church needs now more than ever is to UNSTOP THE FLASK and allow the precious aroma of gratitude to move from here (heart) to here (room), and after filling this place, to overflow into our households, our neighborhoods—any place and every place where people doubt their worth; any place and every place where God's gracious presence is unknown or has been forgotten.

When we come to Christ's table today, we come as those whose sins, though many, have been forgiven. And when we rise from his Table, we go as people so full of gratitude we can't help but say why.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Amen.