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7:36-8:3**

Luke

DO YOU SEE THIS WOMAN?

On Tuesday evening we hosted here at Mayflower a unique group traveling across the United States. Salam Talib, a journalist and computer engineer originally from Iraq, Conor Curran, a veteran of two tours as a US Marine in Iraq and Josh Stieber, also an Iraq war veteran, came through as part of their tour promoting a shift in rhetoric and style of engaging with Iraq and Afghanistan in particular, but also the world in general.

Both of the soldiers had been exposed to the military's approach to combat, to the training in which they effectively "otherize" the opponent in order to make young men and women willing to kill, and sometimes to kill indiscriminately. Both men had seen the horrors that war inflicts on those involved, whether they "win" or lose. Salam's perspective was as a civilian caught up in the turmoil and trying to decide how best to stay alive. To whom would he give his allegiance, usually based on nothing more than the best chance for survival?

In that atmosphere of raw survival, the soldiers recounted, lots of decisions get made in ways that they would not otherwise. They talked about the now infamous video of the killing of several Iraqi citizens and two Reuters news employees which has been released on the internet through the Freedom of Information Act. The Army Company involved was the same company that Josh Stieber served in. They talked about the way that they were trained to view and react to people who looked just like Salam and how they slowly discovered that the image to which they were trained had little to do with the actual people. Once they heard people's stories, they began to discover little difference between their own stories.

Josh and Conor went on to leave the military and when the video broke, Josh took it upon himself to write a letter of apology and reconciliation to the families affected by the attack. In the letter, which you can read at lettertoiraq.com, he writes with contrition and genuine concern for what this kind of mistrust and hatred fosters. He writes about our common humanity needing to play much more of a role in our interaction. But in his talk he also said that

he understood the kind of atmosphere that the soldiers lived in and how that mindset creates a situation where this kind of misguided brutality can take place.

What I found really remarkable about these young men was that they weren't interested in blaming anyone or anything. They were interested in justice, but restorative justice not just the kind of justice that we tend to think of where the bad guys get theirs and the good guys are saved or revenged. That is the kind of thinking that gets us into this mess. This was justice that seeks a balance and seeks to have the kind of understanding that addresses all sides and enables something new to happen. They were interested in telling the stories of everyone involved. In the sharing of our stories we find compassion and peace. Stories are a way of keeping the "other" in our face and maintaining the awareness that at some essential level, everyone and everything is related to everyone and everything else. That is the component that needs to be first and foremost in our hearts and minds. Yet mostly today we find our differences highlighted...we lead with our labels and never hear one another's stories. So we see one another, but we never really *see* one another. Their call was for us to begin to see our common humanity first – complete with all of our shortcomings, our pain and our brokenness - that would allow us to act in certain ways and, more importantly, *not* to act in other ways. It would move us past the "otherization" that the blame game is, and would allow the mysterious and powerful equation of acknowledgment + forgiveness = love to work on us all.

This passage is often used to talk about forgiveness, but there is the same equation at work here and there is much more than just blanket pardon being demonstrated. The meal that Jesus is invited to is, in the ancient world, the primary socialization event. This is why this story is setup in this way, the invitation to such a dinner would have certain expectations for the ancient listener. In Jesus' day, an invitation to a meal was a way of saying, "Tell me more about you". It is remarkable that this Simon, the Pharisee, not to be confused with other Simons like Simon Peter, invites Jesus to the meal because the Pharisees are pretty much standing against Jesus as the religious authorities in the gospel stories. Now Luke could really be seen as slamming on the Pharisees in this passage, just like the other gospels, but we need to be very careful in our reading because the entirety of their history is not contained in the gospels which were written with a pretty specific agenda. The Pharisees represent more of a model than a static definition of a particular group for all of history. Still, in the gospel texts, they seem to play a certain role. They serve as the model for the temple, the place of forgiveness that Jesus criticizes as barred by money, purity and legalism. It is as if the very people who need forgiveness the most are the ones for whom it is withheld.

As a Pharisee, Simon would be standing in opposition to Jesus' comments on the law, but he is apparently is intrigued enough by this wandering teacher to invite him to a meal. Meals in Jesus' time were served on low tables, and the guests would lie on sofas, propped on their left side, taking and eating food from serving dishes with their right hands. Only men would eat together. Women would enter the room only to serve food. They would not talk with the men.

And a woman would always have her hair covered, and would never directly speak to or touch a man in public.

So when this unnamed woman comes into the room where the men are eating, she is violating a huge standard of socially respectable behavior for a woman by simply being in the room. Then there is the question of her character and her actions, both of which are borderline scandalous. Often this story gets told as a tale of forgiveness of this sinful woman, but that is problematic. That interpretation doesn't deal with the woman's vast expressions of love or Jesus' comments to Simon. Still, it is the most common reading and is widely expressed. Look at a sampling of titles for this passage in various translations of the Bible. The New American Bible entitles it: "The Pardon of a Sinful Woman." The New Jerusalem Bible and the New Revised Standard Version call it: "The Woman Who Was a Sinner." Harper Collins Study Bible has, "A Sinful Woman Forgiven." La Nueva Biblia Latinoamericana confuses matters entirely by making her "La mujer pecadora de Magdala" ("The sinful woman from Magdala")! The Christian Community Bible is noncommittal: "Jesus, the Woman and the Pharisee." In five out of these six titles, the sinfulness of the woman is the focus. Two mistakenly lead the reader to believe that the pardon of her sins takes place in this episode, and one reinforces the old Catholic injustice of making this unnamed woman Mary Magdalene and a prostitute, neither of which the Greek text indicates. It is remarkable that none of the translations have thought to point the reader to the way Jesus sees her by entitling it: "A Woman who Shows Great Love."

After all, there are really no sins confessed or forgiven in this passage. Verse 47 makes it completely clear that the woman's sins have already been forgiven before this dinner party. The tense of the verb makes it "has been forgiven," expressing a past action whose effects go on into the present. That's the part of the story we don't know about, what her sins were or when or even how they were forgiven. Did she already know that she was forgiven? Did she come to the dinner party from a really good therapy session? Or did she just have drinks with her friends and get that all out of her system? Or did she sit down with Jesus sometime before this and tell him her story?

As usual, Jesus seems to know something that no other people know. The Pharisees seem shocked at this woman's reputation and actions. She is violating the law, flaunting her sin in front of everyone. But Jesus sees her beyond just those characteristics. He knows that she seeks forgiveness and that forgiveness is the realm of God. I suppose that the Pharisees would have her go to the temple, for that is where God does this sort of thing on that sacred ground. But Jesus knows that there is no un-sacred ground, and that God's forgiveness is available wherever we are...for whomever we are.

Perhaps Jesus' words to the woman in v. 48, "Your sins are forgiven," are a reaffirmation to her of what has already occurred. One thing is very clear: the woman is not forgiven because of her lavish demonstrations of love; rather, the loving actions follow from her experience of having been forgiven. She cries tears, perhaps of joy or extreme gratitude or maybe even tears of

remorse, but she has enough to wash Jesus' feet so this is no small event for her. It is powerful enough for her to risk the public ridicule and the violation of social rules. This is as human as the gospel gets. The "good news" here is that despite our mistakes, our shortcomings, even our utter failures as human beings, God still sees us as the most complete we can be, the most whole human being we are capable of. That is what Jesus reflects to this woman – you are loved by a God who sees the true you, not only the one that is broken, but also the one that is whole. And that comes through the holy equation...acknowledgement + forgiveness = love.

Perhaps this is as close as I get to Jesus being God. Jesus acts like God in this passage. This is why the Pharisees rebuke him, he is forgiving sins which is something in the sacrificial, legalistic system belongs only to certain individuals in a hierarchy. Jesus forgives as God forgives – all sins, no matter how large or how many tears they produce. Jesus acts like God. God knows all about the power of forgiveness, it is we human beings who don't always give or receive it. Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day.

This equation really is the beginning of peace. But notice that it is never a one-sided equation...it takes acknowledgement of mistakes or sins or failures on the part of one party and then forgiveness on the part of the other. And that it always a flowing process, never linear or singular. For most of the time there is enough blame to go around, enough pain and sin to share amongst everyone involved. Jesus spoke Aramaic and the word in that language for forgive is "shaw" it means, to untie. For we are bound by our sins, and only our acknowledgement of both the deeds and our acceptance of the forgiveness frees us up to be compassionate and loving ourselves.

That's why we cultivate otherization. That's why it's a skill we have to foster. That is the way that we ignore the hard but sacred equation that asks us to face our demons. That is the way that we keep ourselves from love, the love that Paul tell us is always patient and kind, never jealous, not boastful or conceited, does not hold grudges or rejoice at wrongdoing but trusts, hopes and endures. That is not easy stuff, which is why love must be practiced. It is the only way to transform our predisposition towards otherizing one another.

Jesus asks Simon to really examine this holy equation. He kind of calls him out at his own dinner party. And by telling him this little story and wrapping it up with "It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love" he is placing the basis of this Pharisees' religion right in his face. If you are about love, to reverse the equation, then you must be about forgiveness. And if your capacity for love is great, it comes from your acknowledgement of all you need forgiveness for.

The Simon inside all of us wants to point fingers and blame, to decide who is responsible and then heap all the fault ceremoniously on that person and walk unencumbered into the night.

We want to be able to place a label on it and move on. Well, that was a bad umpire or an irresponsible and greedy CEO or an overly aggressive soldier without seeing a glimpse of the same broken, limited humanity that is in us all. Yet Jesus bids us to be rescued by our faith, and to go then in peace.

The great Fred Craddock, preacher extraordinaire, once said “Where does one go when told by Christ “Go in peace”? The price of the woman's way of life in the city has been removal from the very institutions that carried the resources to restore her. The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, “You are welcome here.” I wonder if Simon would be able to go in peace. It seems to me that his encounter with Jesus and the woman would cause his peaceful world to fall apart.”

The church of Jesus Christ is a place where this holy equation leads the way. It is a place where we seek peace and therefore we seek to be free from the bonds that enslave us. It is no easy task, and we do it effectively so infrequently that it might not even seem like a goal of this organization. Yet, nothing else will do. Acknowledgement + forgiveness = love is the only thing that can transform the parts of our lives that we can't seem to fix ourselves.

Towards the end of this story, after Simon has answered Jesus' example correctly, Jesus turns towards the woman but says to Simon, “Do you see this woman?” And just like the soldiers who discovered that that they were purveyors of freedom and peace much more with the holy equation than with any time spend on patrol, we have her example before us. “Look at her”, Jesus seems to say, look at the deep cisterns of guilt within her that have been transformed by forgiveness. Can you *see* her? Can you see what it might have taken her to even ask for forgiveness in the first place? I think of this woman like I think of the LGBT community and the church today...told that they must come to the church, but shut off from the church at the same time...told that they are vile and depraved, but with nothing there to escape such a profane and evil sentence. What would it have taken for that woman to come to yet another teacher, another prophet like so many before who she trusted and who eventually rejected her? Jesus offers her only the sacred equation – acknowledgement + forgiveness = love. If you will be willing to come completely, with all of your brokenness and humanity, then there will be forgiveness. Not for the things that you might have been told once needed to be forgiven, but for the same things that we all need forgiveness for. Only then can we love...truly love.

Maybe knowing that forgiveness and love are woven together like a splendid tapestry brings us to a new awareness or perhaps it shocks us into whispers of “What is going on here?” But maybe, just maybe, if only we could bring ourselves to hear this holy equation then we could see that the woman's reaction no longer seems so peculiar...in fact, it seems completely fitting.

That kind of realization could open us up to a whole new level of faith, so that we might go in peace...the kind of peace that passes all understanding.

AMEN



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