

Glen Ridge Congregational Church,
 June 13, 2010; Third Sunday of Pentecost – Proper 6-C
 Luke 7:36-8:3; “Do You See?”
 The Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The woman felt as though her world had unraveled in a moment’s time. Doors had opened, walls had crumbled, thoughts of her future no longer frightened but thrilled her. She felt clean and whole, innocent as a girl still living in her father’s house. Her heart was a wild confusion of sorrow and joy as she followed the rabbi through the doorway.

Ignoring the stares of the men, she walked over to the place where Jesus was reclining at a table. In her hands she held an alabaster jar of perfume. Her body trembled as she approached. She hardly knew what she was doing as she covered his feet with her kisses and then anointed them with the precious perfume, wiping his feet with her hair. How else could she express her heart to the man who had loved her so well?

Like any good Pharisee, Simon loved the law, measuring his days by the steady rhythm of the regulations by which he lived. They were a fence safeguarding his purity, protecting his sense of settled security. How good of the holy God to provide a map for the righteous, a way of life to set him apart from ordinary Jews – like the woman who had just walked through the door, hoping to glean a few scraps from his table.

Simon was surprised that a sinful woman, even a hungry one, would enter his house. But his surprise grew as he noticed she was not eating but weeping so profusely that her tears were spilling onto the feet of one of his guests. Everything about the scene repelled him and offended his sense of order – a notorious harlot kissing the man’s feet, wiping them with her hair, and then pouring perfume over them. It was an astonishing performance.

Even more astonishing was the fact that his guest seemed to enjoy the attention. “If this man were a prophet,” Simon thought, “he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.” All of his questions were put to rest by the scene he had just witnessed. His ordered way of looking at the world was safe enough, bolstered by the judgment he had rendered.

But then something even more astonishing happened: as though he had read Simon’s secret thoughts, Jesus turned to him and spoke, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon answered, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled.”

“You are right,” Jesus said.

Then Jesus turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on

my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” (*From Women of the Bible by Ann Spangler and Jean E. Syswerda*)

Two themes here in this story: the theme of radical hospitality and the theme of radical forgiveness freely available for all who repent.

Her behavior is outrageous – this woman violates every social rule there is – unbound hair may be the mark of a “loose woman” in this culture; women did not touch men. And outrageous too, for Simon anyway, that Jesus accepts this from her.

It was customary at this time to wash the feet of your guests –remember Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper? It was also customary when a guest came into your house to offer a kiss of welcome – there’s no evidence that Simon did either of these traditional hospitable things – in fact, later in the story, Jesus calls him on that. This outrageous unnamed woman did these things. She shows the traditional mideastern hospitality – though Simon only sees that she has violated the social propriety of the time.

It seems to me that Simon is stuck in the facts, the head, of his religion – he thinks, what are prophets for if not to be able to recognize real sin when it occurs? What are prophets if they don’t point to the boundaries between the holy and the unholy; the righteous and the unrighteous. If Jesus is really a prophet, he should be able to see this!

But Jesus asks Simon to look at the woman – he says, you showed me no hospitality. Look how she welcomes me. It’s a different perception isn’t it for Jesus and for Simon. Is this woman a code breaker who ought to be punished? Is she a sinner to be ostracized? Or is she a sinner in need of forgiveness and reconciliation? Is she a person full of hunger who needs life-giving nourishment. It’s a matter of perspective, isn’t it.

This is a story about insiders and outsiders - Simon is the insider – full of knowledge about his religious teachings, about acceptable behavior, comfortable with the rules, the usual standards. But he doesn’t feel the same surprise, the same gratitude this woman feels – I wonder if that isn’t true for us as well – we get used to things as they are and take them for granted. How often do we hear someone who has recovered from a serious illness or accident say, I have a whole new perspective on life. They seem to have a deeper sense of gratitude, of excitement, of joy, don’t they. So it is for this woman. The “outsider” has much to teach us if we don’t stay stuck in the way things are “supposed” to be or stuck in the way they’ve always been. What opportunities do we miss!

There’s a story a pastor tells of his church – he was at a church board meeting – a very difficult meeting - they were discussing lots of tough, long term problems in the congregation – there was much complaining and criticism by various members of the board. People were painting a bleak picture of life in that church. And they were beginning to feel worn down and worn out.

One of the members of the board said to another member, “John, you are managing to stay quiet during this discussion. Don’t you have anything to say?”

John spoke, hesitantly at first. “Well, I agree with your assessment of many of the problems. But I’m probably not the right person to give you a critical judgment. You see, I spent nearly twenty years outside of the church before somebody in this congregation invited me to this church. When I finally found you, it was a wonderful day in my life. I still manage to thank God that I’m here, just glad to be here among folks who love the Lord and enjoy serving God in this church.”

The board fell silent – the pastor reports. Each person was reminded by a recent outsider of the wonder, the glory, the joy of the church that they as old-timers, insiders, had come to take for granted.

We talk a lot about church growth – and maybe this story names one of the best justifications for church growth – that a congregation needs constant exposure to “outsiders” and “newcomers.” It’s often these folks who have a way of reminding us what a treasure it is to be able to welcome Jesus into our lives – what a gift it is to share this awesome good news we have to tell. It’s often these folks who bring freshness to our ministry in a hurting world.

Jesus asks Simon – do you see this woman? Simon knows the story but has stopped being excited by it. Do we see this woman? Do we see her extravagant, outrageous hospitality or do we see an interruption to life as it “should be”? Do we see her joy at radical forgiveness? What kind of vision do we have?

Another church did a comprehensive study of church growth. One of the committee members said, “Our problem is that we never have any visitors. How do we get new members if we don’t have visitors?”

One of the exercises they did in their attempt to grow was an effort to look at their church as some visitor might look at them. They had always considered themselves a friendly church – it seemed that way to them but first time visitors reported that they did not find them so friendly. It turned out that the members were so busy welcoming each other that they didn’t notice visitors in their midst. They just didn’t see them. The insiders failed to see the outsiders. Now, I do hear how friendly we are as a church and that’s a wonderful thing. But maybe our issue is a bit different, though related – what kind of a job do we do welcoming our newer members and friends into the life of the church? One way to do that is to get to know them – get to know their interests, their talents, their experiences in their prior churches. And make an effort to encourage them to offer their talents in the ministry of this church – even though their ways just might be different from our experience - but we have to really see them to do that, don’t we. We want to do a better job of – the technical term is “new member assimilation” – but the question is how do we welcome people to the table. Do we really see the outsiders in our midst? Are we willing to take the risk to be transformed?

Today’s gospel calls us to open our eyes and see among us the outcast, the outsiders, as sisters and brothers at the table. Who of us has never felt like an outsider, like an outcast, like we don’t belong. I’d guess that we all know how that feels. Not only have we all been Simon at one time or another, but we’ve been this unnamed woman too.

We are here in worship to receive Jesus into our hearts and minds. How does this story about a woman touch us? She’s a woman of the city – an outsider and a sinner – but she breaks in and was better at receiving Jesus than Simon the insider? If we are to be disciples of Jesus, then we are called to do the same – to pay attention. To see. To

hear. To welcome. To love. To greet our brothers and sisters in Christ and to be greeted with outrageous, open handed and open hearted hospitality.

Another thing about the woman – she barged in to Simon’s home – though she was known as a notorious sinner she knew her need for forgiveness and grace. Her repentance had turned her world upside down – opening up an entirely new view of things. Simon’s sin was tucked away – even hidden from himself. Here’s the thing: though his sin might have been less obvious, it was more insidious, more dangerous. He didn’t see his own alienation from God and neighbor through his judgmentalism, through his limited vision. And don’t we all judge, have limited vision at times.

Back in Middlebury we had a number of AA meetings in our building - one during the week day when parents would come to pick up their children from our preschool. These groups would often meet in the driveway when the meeting was on break – the AA folk would be standing around outside as the preschool cars lined up for pickup. One day one of the mothers complained about these “thugs” standing around outside the preschool – she wasn’t sure they were acceptable people for her children to see, to be around. Like Simon, her sense of order was disturbed.

The director of the preschool and I really didn’t know what to say to this mom – we tried to explain that these “thugs” were in the fight of their lives in recovery – that we admired them for their hard work and that their children certainly weren’t in danger from their presence – but I’m not sure the mom was convinced. I thought of this incident as I read this passage – how we can get so caught up in the way things “should be” that we lose our perspective on what we are seeing.

And then I thought about those women, again, from Bread for the Journey – who absolutely glow at the joy they’ve experienced from repentance and the chance for new life. You should have been at the Integrity House graduation last night – a wondrous experience of the joy and gratitude that repentance and forgiveness brings – for the transformation of lives.

Like the woman in our story today who realized just how lost she had been, these graduates know about that. And their gratitude is awesome. Like the woman in our story, their doors have opened, their walls have crumbled, and thoughts of their futures no longer frighten but thrill them. They feel clean and whole – and that’s a gift that’s available to each and every one of us as well.

Let’s be honest – many of us might well respond to this sinful woman just as the Pharisee did. It’s so easy to look more with judgment than love at people whose lives have been devastated by sin. But Jesus looked at both her and at Simon and saw the same thing – both of them with their need for forgiveness. And he gave it freely. We don’t know what Simon’s response was, but her response is evident in her tears and kisses. This story isn’t included in scripture just so we can see the forgiveness given to one woman – it’s included so we can know that no matter how sinful, how broken, how entrenched in error we might be, forgiveness is available if only we seek it in faith. That’s the promise. That’s the joy. What a blessing that’s available to all of us.

Jesus says to the woman, says to us: your faith has saved you. Go in peace. May we all experience that and then share it with all we meet. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, you have been so gracious to us. All that we have, all that we are has come as gift from you. Lord, we become accustomed to your graciousness. We take your love for granted. We forget what a great privilege it is to know your word, to

be in your church, to be recipients of your grace. Renew in us an awareness of how much we owe to your love. Rekindle in us the flame of love for your way. Strengthen us to do your will. Above all, enable us to reach out, in your name, to those who do not know you. Give us the words we need to tell the story of your salvation. Give us lives which show forth your grace in our daily living. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.