

The Collar and the Badge

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Luke 7:40-8:3

Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

I once had a friend who was a police officer in the city but who lived in a neighboring small town. He told me that one of his complaints about his job was that if he was wearing his uniform, he could not even pick up milk and bread without someone accosting him and telling him how he should be doing his job. There were always speeders in a certain subdivision and police running radar on the wrong road. There was noise here or loitering there, and if the police were really doing their job, they would be dealing with the important things and not what it seemed to the observer that the police were doing instead. No matter how hard he tried to explain to his neighbors that he actually lived out of his jurisdiction and could not act on their many suggestions, the comments persisted.

One night at supper, after he had told me this, I told him that I had the opposite problem. When I am in public wearing a clergy shirt and collar, no one will make eye contact with me. It is strange; everyone becomes terse and somber. It is as if they think I know what they've done. As if being a clergy-person makes you some kind of mind-

reader (or heart-reader). Furthermore, it is as though people think that I somehow know what they have done or what they believe, it is as if I am quietly judging them for what I somehow know.

In this morning's text, we hear one of the most beautiful stories from the life of Christ. Jesus has accepted a dinner invitation at the home of one of the Pharisees when a woman with a certain reputation, a woman who hears Jesus is present, enters the house and begins to kiss and anoint and wash his feet, weeping and wiping his feet with her hair.

And here Jesus again finds himself being criticized for the company he keeps: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." And Jesus, ever willing to see through social divisions and social prejudices, sees this woman as more. He sees her as a forgiven child of God. He sees her not with the eyes of the world but with the eyes of God.

The challenge for you and I is to believe that the eyes with which Christ saw this woman are the same eyes with which he sees you and me.

For this woman and for us, our natural response to the realization that we have been forgiven *by* Christ is praise and adoration *of* Christ. The others present at Simon's house could not see beyond this woman's past to the new future Christ had given her. It was as though they arrogantly knew who was deserving of God's grace and who was not. It was as though they believed God's love to be limited to a certain segment of the social order and not to all segments of the social order. And here we find Jesus, challenging the conventions of his day and of ours; showing that by the love of the Son no one, regardless of what they have done is permanently alienated from the Father.

Luke does not tell us the sins of this woman. Why? Because they no longer matter. She has been forgiven, forgiven for a great deal but forgiven nonetheless. My experiences as a pastor have shown me that despite the fact that people so often want things for themselves, forgiveness is not one of them. It is so often easier to forgive than to be forgiven. It is often easier to believe another can be forgiven than to believe that we can be forgiven ourselves.

However, this morning's text shows us that no matter where we are in our lives or where we have come from, Jesus stands at the ready, willing, wanting, to forgive us for our sins. Even when those around us might speak ill of us, might wonder how we dare call ourselves disciples of Christ or dare enter a church, Christ sits and waits with a willingness to forgive that is greater than our ability to sin.

It might be easy to assume that this woman was forgiven simply because of what she did for Christ in this story. However, that would miss the point. She is not forgiven by her tender works of mercy for Christ; she weeps and anoints and kisses *because* she has been forgiven. Her forgiveness is not conditional upon what she does for Christ. Her

good works are instead a response to that state of being forgiven, to that new life Christ has granted her. That is what is central to the Christian life: coming to terms with Jesus' great and unconditional forgiveness of our sins and then living as thankful people in response to the great grace, the great undeserved love that has been given to us.

I know that there are people here today (because they are in every church I have served) who wonder why I don't stand here and pound the pulpit and yell and scream about who is going to hell, as though it is true that in order for you and I to go to heaven someone else has to go to hell, as if salvation worked like a gigantic teeter-totter, with some going up and some going down, and you cannot have one without the other.

My point is that I think the devil has gotten enough air time in Christian pulpits. My point is that there are many people in this world who are living the wrong way and who are perfectly comfortable with it and who need to hear another way. However, my point is that I doubt many of them get up and come to an 8:45 a.m. Christian worship service.

My point is that we are taught by television vis a vis Madison Avenue to believe that we are pretty rotten people anyway and not children of the Heavenly Father, made in the image of God. My point is that I believe it is juvenile to try to make you feel better about your sins by doing nothing more than telling you about the people who are worse than you are. My point is that Jesus has already paid the price and the punishment for your sins, wiping away all your transgressions and only asking in return that you believe it by living as a person who believes it.

My point is that Jesus had ample opportunities to condemn this woman for her past and yet he celebrates her acceptance of the new life he offers and praises her for living in a new way and he calls the so-called righteous people to emulate her behavior as an appropriate display of piety.

Who is better off in this story: the ones who use their behavior to belittle and demean others as spiritually inferior or this woman, the one with the reputation, the one everyone knew about, the one who was not "our kind of people," the one who embraced Christ and revered him with pure adoration, devotion, and love?

My point is that it is not enough for the church's proclamation to be that the building is on fire. My point is that we also have to be about the business of giving people hope in the midst of the heat and the smoke that we know where the fire escapes are and we will find them together.

Jesus makes the point here that Christian living is rooted in thanksgiving; thanksgiving for what Christ has done for us, as individuals and as a community of faith. We don't live as disciples of Jesus Christ in order for Christ to love us. We live as disciples of Jesus Christ because we have come to an awareness of his love for us and

that love of which we have become aware empowers us to live in a way with each other and this community that the world has never seen outside of the people of Jesus Christ.

And that is exciting. And that is different, different from how the world perceives us, different from how the world judges us, perhaps even different from how we see ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In my last church, I was in my office working when I heard the door open and the mailman enter the building and walk to the secretary's office. They were friends and exchanged some pleasantries before he said, "Oh! By the way, I preached at my church last Sunday!"

Genuinely excited by this, my secretary said, "Great! What did you preach on?"

And as he left the building to continue delivering the mail, he shouted back to her, "Damnation! What else?"

And I sat there at my desk and I thought about that statement. "Damnation! What else?" and then I thought, "How about salvation?"

How about new life?

How about the new creation we become in Christ?

How about the good news that we can truly die to our old selves?

How about the fact that we can, in Christ, live in a new way?

How about believing that we no longer need to be prisoners to our past?

How about proclaiming that no one is out of Christ's reach?

How about hope?

How about letting go, really letting go of the anchor that is the past and instead anchoring ourselves to Christ and trusting him, wherever he leads us?

Sisters and brothers, we follow the one who was ostracized, three-times denied, and crucified because he had the audacity to proclaim that those who society said were out of God's favor were still children of almighty God and worthy of his redeeming. And if God could see them in a new way, then everyone else was going to have to as well.

So what does this mean for us? It means that if Jesus could emancipate others from the prisons of their past, then he can, he must, he will do the same for us. It is so hard for us to accept the new life Christ offers to us because it means we now have to regard ourselves in a new way. It means that we cannot continue to torture ourselves over a past that God has forgiven, and that we have to let that past go. We can no longer hold on to those feelings of guilt just because we think if we feel bad, we somehow are paying a penance on the wrong we have done and we somehow do not need Christ's forgiveness.

We have to let it go. We can let it go. For this Christ came. For this is abundant life. "Jesus said, 'Therefore I tell you, her sins which were many, have been forgiven.'" I told you my struggle at the beginning of this message because I want you to understand that struggling to comprehend the depth of Christ's mercy is a normal part of the

Christian experience. Even your pastor struggles with what it means to be forgiven by God, to make peace with my past.

Yet what is most important is where we go from here. What is it that we, as Crozet United Methodist Church, are willing to give of ourselves in gratitude for the great grace shown to us? What are we willing to do? How will we anoint the Christ who saves us?

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.